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"THESE MEN ARE FRIENDS AND BROTHERS, AND THEY SHALL SUFFER NO HARM!"

OR,

The Border Beagle's Secret Mission.

A Romance of the Great Craze.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
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LANCE," "MUSTANG SAM," "HURRICANE
BILL," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE INDIAN MESSIAH'S MOUTHPIECE.

THUMP! Thump! Thump!
As that dull, yet penetrating sound came float-
ing to their ears, both horsemen drew rein, and
their eyes met; one pair full of silent inquiry,
the other half-stern, half-mocking.
"What is it, Big Horn?"

"Something more than a cock-pheasant on a mossy log, if you'll take my word for it, Max. 'Light and tie, pardner!' and Buck Horton swung himself lightly out of the saddle, leading his horse under a pendent bough, to which he fastened the animal.

"Use the scary-time-loop, Max," he added, as he glanced toward his hesitating companion. "When we come back, it may be in too big a hurry to bother with knots."

"Then you reckon on trouble?"

"You said you wanted to find Silverblade, didn't you?"

"I want Dave Woodbridge, yes."

"It's Silverblade now, and will be until this dance craze dies out. Well, the young fellow is over yonder, where that war-drum sounded, and—"

"Not war-drum, surely Horton?"

"Too nearly that for a man of my size to see any fun in it," was the grim response. "There's blood on the moon, I tell you, man! And if we don't see it here on earth before the snow flies, then we're mighty sight luckier than I can believe, just now!"

"You mean that the Sioux may break out? That's too unlikely, I'm sure."

"When a prairie fire starts, with the wind blowing a gale, can you expect the flames to skip all weeds and brush, simply because it started in plain grass? You'd call any man a fool for trying to reason that way, but, how much better are you doing now? The fire has already started, and if it isn't smothered before it gets fairly under headway, 'twill sweep everything before it, until—"

"Until what, pardner?"

"Until Uncle Sam turns his boys in blue free to do their duty! But I'm not preaching a sermon, Max," laughing lightly. "I simply wish to prepare you for a great change in Dave Woodbridge."

"I can't think he'd join the hostiles. Why, man, even his father—"

"Is as white as you or I, Max, but his mother is a full-blood Shoshone, and you'd ought to know what that means. Like father, like daughter, like mother like son, it ought to read; and when the Indian wife of Luke Woodbridge gets wind of what is going on in this section, my good horse against yours that she calls her son Silverblade, not David."

Max made no reply, but followed his companion from the spot where their horses were now hitched, breasting a steep incline, picking their way rapidly through trees and bushes, rounding rocks too large to be passed over, making their way toward the crest, from whence they could obtain a glimpse of the Indian camp.

The two had met by accident, and being on friendly terms, nothing was more natural than that the cowboy, Max Donaldson, should make known his mission: to recall a wayward son to the sick-bed of his mother.

For some time past, Max had heard rumors of Sioux emissaries in that region, preaching the wild doctrine of the Indian Messiah, and striving to work up a war fever among the then friendly Grosventres, Crees, Bannocks and Shoshones; but, until now, he had refused to believe there was aught serious in the matter.

Possibly the handsome young cowboy might have been less skeptical had his heart felt less tender toward the Indian race, as typified in one precious unit: Enola Woodbridge, only daughter of his employer, Luke Woodbridge, and his Shoshone wife.

"Long range, or short, pardner?" muttered Buck, pausing as they gained their first glimpse of the Indian camp in the valley.

"Ears as well as eyes," responded Donaldson. "Lead on."

Horton changed their course, keeping well under cover, and in a few minutes paused on the brink of a slope so steep as to be little less than a precipice on a small scale. And there, parting a screen of scrubby pines, the two looked upon a strangely interesting spectacle.

The camp had been pitched near a small creek, where the ground was level and comparatively free from bushes or trees, though a little clump of the taller growth sheltered and partially screened a rude wickiup of skins and blankets.

In front of this tent, and several rods away, a peeled pole had been planted in the ground. On its smooth trunk were emblems rudely daubed in paint. From its apex hung something like a dirty shirt of calico, its free end faintly fluttering in the light breeze.

Around this pole, hand joined to hand, nearly a score almost naked figures were slowly circling, keeping time by stamping their feet, their heads thrown back until their eyes stared toward the zenith, seemingly fascinated by the

sun, which, fortunately for them, was partially dimmed by the haze of Indian Summer.

Here and there were other Indians, from one full-blood who had never yet discarded blanket or buffalo-robe for the garments of civilization, through all the quarterings down to those who had to call up tradition to prove their right to participate, so slightly was their white blood tinged with red.

Some stood alone, gravely or doubtfully watching the sluggish dancers, as yet proof against contagion. Others, in little knots, seemed eagerly discussing some point, and more than one hand was flourishing bared steel as the debate waxed warm: not against their mates, but in menace for the as yet invisible enemy of their race.

"You see him, then?" whispered Horton, as the cowboy gave a start. "Not so mighty much like David Woodbridge, is he? Didn't I—*For your life, man!*"

His last whisper came in a fierce hiss, and his hands gripped Max Donaldson with paralyzing force, as the cowboy seemed on the point of breaking cover.

Forcing him back and down, Big Horn Buck muttered:

"Are you crazy? Show up, now, and your hide would be a skimmer before you could call out three words!"

"But, Mrs. Woodbridge wants her boy, and I must!"

"She'll never see her boy again—as a boy! He's put on manhood with his paint and feathers, and—"

Thump! thump! thump!

Once again that dull, hollow, yet reverberating sound broke forth, and as its echoes died away, a long-drawn, peculiarly intoned cry followed, and Buck Horton hastily added:

"The devil's imp is on deck, and if you want to see how far your David is the old David, just say you'll be content with watching the little circus for five minutes!"

"What is it? I'll wait—only I've got to see the boy!"

"Seeing 's all right, but if you show up too soon, I'm betting long odds you'll feel him!" grimly assured the elder man, relaxing his grip.

In front of the wickiup now stood a being of medium size, his head thrown back, his eyes fixed upon the sun, toward which his arms were extended, his fingers fluttering swiftly for the moment, while that strange cry was repeated; a cry without words, yet which had the power of exacting submission, if not of inspiring awe.

"Look at 'em!" muttered Horton, as the dancers paused, to bend their heads in company with all others gathered there. "What can't bold trickery do? And Silverblade among the rest!"

"'Tis the voice of the mighty Messiah, my children!" cried the fantastically painted being in front of the lodge. "He calls, but only the ears of the true believers can rightly interpret his words. He calls unto you all, and, that you may take warning in good time, he makes me his mouthpiece!"

"What is he saying?" whispered Donaldson.

"Shoshone dialect. Listen! I'll interpret the main points," hurriedly answered Horton, never once taking his gaze from that figure, the face of which he was scanning with an interest that caused his eyes to glitter as though backed by living fire.

A loving mother could hardly have recognized her son under that fantastic mask of paint, part of the striking regalia designed by the mighty medicine-chief of the Sioux, Sitting Bull himself.

The ground color was black, with an indigo tinge. On chin and forehead showed a crescent drawn in light blue, while each cheek bore a cross of brightest vermillion.

His hair, black as midnight, fell in elf-locks over his shoulders, the scalp-lock, neatly braided and intertwined with scarlet ribbons, dividing so as to let an end pass each ear, then hang over his breast.

A tiara of eagle-feathers rested on his head, and bright disks hung in chains over the front of his fantastically painted shirt. Each one of those emblems had its own meaning, but only the fully initiated could ever receive the message they bore, and these gathered Shoshones were only at the threshold of the great mystery.

"The Messiah has spoken aloud, but his words have fallen on dulled ears," resumed the medicine-man, after a brief pause, his glittering eyes passing slowly from face to face as the others stood with bowed heads and hands crossed over their breasts. "He is sad, but not despondent. He still hopes that his children have not lost all

the fire of their race through living so far toward the eternal snows of the north. He still hopes that their ears may be opened and the eyes unsealed to the glorious truth. That time may come to pass, he has chosen a mouthpiece through which his life-giving message may reach his chosen children of the mother Snake.

"That means the Shoshones or Snakes, as the used to be called," explained Horton.

"If there is a Messiah, and he is all-powerful all-knowing, as you say, father," suddenly spoke up a tall, slender, finely-featured youth, who had stood apart in gloomy silence during the dance.

"Do you dare doubt his existence, Silverblade?"

"If there be a Messiah, and he is all you claim for him," calmly persisted the young man, "why does he not speak direct to us, since we are his beloved children?"

"Surely you heard his voice, but just now Silverblade?"

"We heard a voice, yes. If that voice belonged to the Messiah, and we are his chosen children, as you say, why does he speak to us in an unknown tongue? If he knows all, he must know we are Shoshones. Why does he not talk to us as a Shoshone, that we may learn his wishes at first hand?"

"You are the son of a pure-blood Shoshone Silverblade; why, then, do you speak with the tongue of the hated pale-faces?"

CHAPTER II.

SILVERBLADE, THE SHOSHONE.

THE medicine-man put that question with almost vicious sharpness, his thin lips curling back and exposing his teeth, his head and neck craning forward, his arms drawn back with tightly-clinched hands.

But then, before an answer could be given, he flung his hands forward, straightening his form, flashing a glance upward toward the red sun breaking into a chant, the words of which were unintelligible to both white men and red-skin, but which none of those present offered to break in upon.

Silverblade fell back a few paces, the former look of gloomy doubt returning to his face, his eyes downcast like one in deep thought.

"Through my lips the Messiah speaks to his chosen children!" the medicine-man cried, once more in the Shoshone dialect, once more with glittering eyes striving to read each face around him. "Will they open their ears to the truth, or must I answer the Messiah that all are dead to hope, to teaching, to revelation? Must I say that under all the red skins I see before me flows only muddy white water?"

"Speak! we are eager to hear the truth!"

"No! 'tis pure red blood! All red blood!"

"We are white no longer!" cried one of the gathering, the curl in his brown locks betraying his mixed race. "See! I let fall on the earth my last drop of muddy water!"

He drew a keen knife across his arm, sending a shower of blood flying as he shook the member viciously.

That fanatical action found nearly a dozen imitators, but Silverblade never unfolded his arms, though his grave eyes followed each fanatic as bright steel flashed and red blood flowed.

"And you, my son?" asked the medicine-man, advancing until his hand could drop on a shoulder. "Must we call you David Woodbridge, instead of Silverblade, the Shoshone?"

"What would you have me do, father?"

"Prove that you, too, are a true son of the Messiah!"

"Like these?" flinging out a hand, a faint smile that was almost contemptuous as he indicated those half-crazed fanatics.

"Are you afraid of shedding blood?"

"Let time answer you, father," with a cold bow, as he drew back from that touch. "When Silverblade bleeds, 'twill be the hand of an enemy that breaks the skin, not his own."

"And that enemy will be—red or white?"

"I am Silverblade, son of Weenamoo."

"And Weenamoo was daughter to He-That-Fights-Long. Will his grandson hang back when the Messiah calls aloud?"

"When he hears that call, so as to fully understand its meaning, Silverblade will give his answer."

The medicine-man turned abruptly away, but nothing in his face betrayed whether he was satisfied with that decision, or too angry to waste further time on a stubborn subject.

He lifted his arms, uttering a cry that drew the attention of all toward him; then, without further preliminary he began:

"Through his chosen mouthpiece, the Indian Messiah now speaks to you, children of the Great

Snake! But before my poor tongue shapes his wondrous message, he bids me tell his children what mine eyes have seen, my ears drank in at the one pure and holy source.

"I was sleeping, and while asleep, a spirit bade me rise up and follow. Through mountains, over plains, across rivers, for sun after sun, I followed this spirit guide, and in the end he brought me to where arose aloft a mighty pillar of fire. And as I shielded my aching eyes from this too bright glow, I heard me a grave and earnest voice speaking words of glorious portent!

"Only those who have been elected by the Messiah may know what those words are, but I can tell you what they ended with: In the pillar of fire dying away, in the face of the mountain splitting apart and rolling back on each side as one parts the door to one's tepee with a hand. Then the Indian Messiah stood revealed before mine eyes!"

"Tell us of the Indian Messiah! Let his chosen children behold their Spirit Father, if only through your eyes!"

"Not now, but when you are worthy," said the medicine-man, his tones growing softer and more kindly, a smile causing that grim mask of dried paint to wrinkle and crack for the moment. "Enough that I bring to you the message the Indian Messiah gave his slave: enough that I tell you how, in the days to come, you may all stand face to face with that all-glorious presence, even as I stood beneath his shining eyes!"

"The Messiah told me, and bade me make it known to all in whose veins flowed the blood of the red-man, that his mission was to restore the whole earth to the Indian and the buffalo. He told me that the entire earth should once more be peopled by vast tribes of red-men, and that all the dead warriors and chiefs and squaws and papposes should be restored to life, with each one a thousand fat buffalo for their own."

"The Messiah bade me tell his true children that they should evermore live in peace and plenty, without labor save of the hunt, without sickness, pain or starvation to steal through their tepees."

"The Messiah bade me tell his children that when all had come to know him, to acknowledge his power, and yield unto him their hearts, their perfect trust, he would make them proof against the bullets and knives of the pale-faces, and give them power to free the entire earth from those ashy-skinned curses!"

Up to this point the Indians had stood as though bound by a spell, breathless with interest, their eyes glowing as though on fire, only their nervously-working fingers betraying how intense was their fever.

But now their passions broke bonds, and in the wild chorus of yells and cheers the medicine-man felt his voice drowned, and he stood in grim silence, watching the effect of his cunningly chosen words. And a smile curled his thin lips as he saw even Silverblade losing his stoical calm, though he did not actually join in that mad dance.

In whispers, Big Horn Buck interpreted the main points of this impetuous speech to his companion, who was but imperfectly acquainted with the Shoshone dialect.

"Do you still wonder that the lad is carried away by the fever, pardner?" the elder man asked, studying the hard-set face of his companion. "Think of what an Indian heaven this earth would be if all this might come to pass! Just think of it! And the only imp down yonder who doesn't religiously believe every word of that rot is the medicine-man himself!"

"'Twould be a religious act to send a bullet through his evil brain, this minute!" and Donaldson nervously fingered his revolver as he pressed a little forward.

"Don't be a fool, man!" frowned Horton, gripping an arm and holding his companion back. "'Twould be a heap sight surer death for both of us! And the first to strike would be Silverblade!"

"I don't—I can't think that of him—yet!"

"You will, before—Hist!"

That break was caused by a move on the part of David Woodbridge, who stepped toward the medicine-man, one hand extended as though to lend force to his words!

"If the Indian Messiah spoke these words to you, father, he surely told you more? He told you when this glorious day is to dawn? He gave you some token by which his children might know a true prophet was speaking unto them, and not a mere dreamer of idle dreams?"

"The Indian Messiah did say more, did speak still plainer," was the response. "He did give his messenger a token. But, whether that to-

ken ever meets the eyes of the Snake Children depend on their faith. If they believe, they shall see."

"How can they believe without first seeing, father?"

"As other red-men have believed; through perfect faith!" was the stern retort, his clinched hands uplifting, his eyes flashing fire. "Why are the mighty Sioux buying up all the rifles and cartridges they can find? Why are they stowing away meat in the lava beds? Why are they sending runners to every point of the earth to spread the glad tidings given them by their Messiah? Because they have faith, even though their own eyes have not seen! Because they believe their medicine-chiefs who have seen and heard and felt!"

"Why have the Sioux, the Cheyennes, the Arapahoes, all clasped hands in brotherhood? Because they have faith!"

"Why have the Utes, the Piutes, the Nez Perces, the Navajoes, all sworn to come from the west and the southwest at the first war-cry? Because they, too, have faith in the Messiah!"

"Why have I come so far toward the land of the Great Queen to bear these wondrous tidings unto the Shoshones, the Crees, the Bannocks? Because I have faith! Because I want all my red brethren to be in arms and ready for the day-dawn! Because the Indian Messiah is only holding back his hand until the most remote of his children are duly warned, that they may seek the high lands in time to escape being swept away by the mighty wave of melted earth and rocks which is to bury from sight forever each and every white man!"

Once more the fired passions of the Shoshones broke forth, and the medicine-man was forced to cease speaking.

Silverblade fell back, answered, yet not entirely convinced. His troubled countenance told as much, and had not his eyes been down-cast at that moment, he might have had his suspicions strengthened by the venomous look which those greenish-gray eyes cast upon him.

The two white men had listened to this interchange of words with intense interest. Even Horton looked upon Silverblade with more favor than at first, for he could see how strong was the struggle going on between red blood and white training.

"He's not all spoiled, pardner, I don't reckon. If a body could only get him off by himself, for a good, solid, white man's talk, maybe he could be saved, even yet!"

"He shall be, or I'll—"

Max Donaldson, possibly because he recalled the last words whispered by Enola, David's sister, was terribly in earnest just then. So much so, in fact, that in changing his position, he did so without due caution and regard for the nature of their footing.

A bit of the frost-eaten rock crumbled under his shifting weight, and, making a vain clutch at a scrub pine to save himself, the cowboy went plunging down the steep bank, keeping his feet as by a miracle, until he struck the level ground, less than a dozen rods from the medicine-man and his excited following!

It all happened so swiftly that Big Horn Buck was unable to save his companion, and with the swift mind-working of one who has often seen his life hang on the turning of a card, he leaped boldly down the slope, at the same time shouting aloud:

"We're friends! Don't shoot!"

Sure-footed as a panther, Horton kept from falling, checking himself just as he reached the spot where Max Donaldson had fallen at full length. And, standing in front of the luckless cowboy, he held up his empty hands, palms toward the astonished company, again crying aloud:

"We're friends to all here! See! our hands speak peace, not war!"

The medicine-man had stood like one petrified, staring at those shapes, but, as the little cloud of dust floated away and left clear that erect figure, a cry broke from his lips:

"The Border Beagle!"

Swift as thought one hand flashed beneath that painted shirt, to bring forth a revolver, its hammer lifting as it swung to a level, its silver bead covering that broad bosom, and—

"Hold!" cried Silverblade, leaping forward and knocking that sinewy arm upward just as the weapon exploded. "He is a friend! Harm him not!"

"He is a spy!" shouted the medicine-man, trying to wrest his arm free from that grip.

"Kill him, or he will ruin us all!"

"Then you must kill me first!" cried the young man, wresting away the pistol, and springing in front of the white men. "I an-

swer for them both! Their skins are white, but their hearts are red! I answer for them—I, Silverblade, the Shoshone!"

CHAPTER III.

TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT IT.

ALTHOUGH not seriously injured by his fall, Max Donaldson was sorely shaken up, and hardly realized what he was doing when he scrambled to his feet, hands mechanically fumbling at the weapons in his belt.

"Don't ye do it!" hurriedly warned Horton, one hand flying back to grip an arm in restraint. "Shoot, and we die right here!"

The cowboy cleared his eyes with a dash of his free hand, giving a cry as he recognized that tall, lithe shape just coming to a pause before them.

"Silverblade—David—your mother wants—"

"Be still!" came in stern warning, his face still toward the medicine-man and the Indians, his hand raised in token of peace, even while its mate gripped that captured revolver. "Peace, my brothers! Are enemies so scarce that we must murder our friends?"

A brief silence that might end in death, or result in life prolonged, just as that paint-masked mouthpiece of the Indian Messiah saw fit to decide.

Back of him the Indians gripped their weapons, crouching for the triple death which his lips might pronounce. If that word was given, what would be the end? Once tasting human blood, who could place bound or limit on their inherited lusts?

"I ask for peace, but if it must be war, let the lips that give the signal guard themselves!" boldly cried Silverblade, his eyes watching the painted face of the medicine-man as the latter slowly recoiled. "These men are friends and brothers, and they shall suffer no harm while Silverblade lives!"

"A straight tongue, my brothers!" chimed in Horton, in the same dialect. "We came here by accident, and have neither seen nor heard aught to make our brothers feel angry toward us. We, too, ask for peace. Why will you make us fight for it?"

The medicine-man suddenly flung up his arms, uttering a few cries, rather than words, in a strained, unnatural voice, then staggered away toward the wickiup while saying:

"Wait, my children! Give time for the Messiah to place the right words in his mouthpiece! Wait, until I come forth!"

"Thank you, Silverblade," and Horton touched the young man with an elbow as the trio followed the medicine-man with their eyes until he vanished within the tepee. "If it comes to a fight, you jump out of line and give us room to spread ourselves. Better two than three!"

With a quick change of position Silverblade placed his own body between Horton and the tent, at the same time slowly moving away in company of the two men.

"I see it, lad!" averred the Border Beagle, with the dimmest of smiles flitting across his face as he caught sight of a muzzle—pistol or rifle—just peeping through an open joint in those skins.

If Silverblade heard, he gave no sign. He was facing the Indians, some of whom were scowling blackly, others openly fingering their weapons while waiting for the promised message from the Messiah.

His eyes flashed as a number of the younger members drew together as though to hem them in, and once more his empty hand rose in warning.

"Why block the trail, brothers? Have you no ears? Did you not hear Silverblade give bond for these, his brothers?"

"Silverblade was a Shoshone. 'Tis a white boy speaking in his name, just now!"

"They are all white! Did you not hear what the Indian Messiah promised? When the great wave comes, where will the white dogs be?"

"Too dead for howling, but I'll pray for their heads to lie near enough the muzzle for my fingers to grip their scalps!" laughed one of the party: he whose curling brown locks proclaimed almost all-white blood.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The hollow notes of the Indian drum came from the closed wickiup, and all eyes were drawn in that direction.

"Ready for a break, pardner!" muttered Horton, to the cowboy. "If that devil comes out to set the dogs on, shoot and jump! We're gone 'coons if we can't make our horses first!"

Even Silverblade seemed to hold his breath during those few moments, but, as the skin flap hung undisturbed, and he could no longer

detect that menacing muzzle at the slit, he silently pushed his friends forward, clearing the little circle before the Shoshone seemed to note his purpose.

"Our father says it is peace, brothers," the young man declared in calm tones, though really far from feeling assured he was rightly interpreting those hollow notes. "As for these, my friends, they will seal their lips. They will forget all their eyes and ears may have told them this day."

A few more strides would carry them to cover which, if not bullet-proof, would give them a fair chance to fight for life should the worst come; but neither of the trio quickened their pace in the least, though Silverblade still kept his body as a shield to that of the man whose unexpected coming had so greatly startled the medicine-man.

The Indians made no attempt to follow or check them. They stood irresolute, waiting for the words of their father. But the wickiup did not open, and the mouthpiece of the Messiah remained silent.

Once under cover, the three men quickened their pace, climbing the range and putting the crest between themselves and the Indian camp before pausing for speech. Then—

"The way is open for my brothers," said Silverblade, with a grave bow, never more the Indian than now. "They heard the pledge Silverblade gave for them, and he does not need ask them to make it good."

"Your mother wants you, David," hurriedly informed Donaldson, grasping a hand and pressing it warmly.

"I have no mother," was the grave interposition. "I have only a Messiah."

"Your mother is sick, I tell you, boy! Enola urged me to find you and say come home! Your mother called to you nearly all last night, in her delirium, and now—you'll come home Davie, lad?"

His tones grew softer as he noted the quick spasm which flitted across that handsome face; but, Silverblade drew back, slowly shaking his head as he said:

"I have no home, no mother, no kindred now. I have nothing, I can do nothing until the coming of the Messiah!"

"Yet you claimed us as brothers, back yonder, David," urged Big Horn Buck.

"Because I would not see your blood shed—just yet," came the almost cold response.

"If the promised Messiah really comes, you would be willing to see even that, then?"

"You are white—all white. If the Messiah comes, he will bring the curse against all of your race. Then I could see even you two die, with dry eyes, with a song of triumph, on my lips!"

"You must come home, David!" again insisted the cowboy, impatiently. "Your mother is sick, and calls for her son. And Enola—can't you begin to see what I have known from the very first, Dave Woodbridge? Don't you know that the devil's imp has crept into your home? Can't you guess why John Godfrey is staying there? Come home and drive him away, if you love your sister!"

"Enola has a father: speak to him. I have no ears for such matters now," spoke the fanatical young man, drawing back. "I am waiting for the coming of the Messiah."

"And you really believe he will come in material shape, Silverblade?" asked Horton, curiously watching the other.

"He has promised. He will come. And why not?" with sudden fire in eyes and in voice. "Is there not good cause for his coming? Have not his red children borne the heavy burden long enough? Are they forever to remain slaves, worse than dogs, under the heel of the cursed white man?"

"Your father is white, isn't he, Silverblade?"

"I have no father, save the Messiah."

"Then, Luke Woodbridge is white, isn't he?" persisted Horton.

"He is white, yes."

"If all white people are to perish at the coming of the Messiah, Luke Woodbridge is one of the doomed?"

"He is one of the doomed."

"Yet you say your one great hope lies in the speedy coming of the Indian Messiah! Could you see your father doomed to perish, with my eyes, Silverblade?"

There was a brief silence, during which the three men gazed intently at each other, two against one. But, the one never flinched—never gave a sign of yielding, unless it was in his slightly softened tones as he spoke again:

"Listen to me, white man! I will speak to you as a brother, it may be for the last time. I

will try to show you my heart; the heart that is now all red, all Indian!

"All things have two sides, and this is not an exception. My eyes see one side, yours the other. That is as it should be, for you are white, I am red—all red!"

"You laugh at the idea of an Indian Messiah. I also laugh, but in a different way. You laugh because you think the red-men foolish. I laugh because I know they will be saved by that coming. I laugh because I know that advent will right their wrongs, will remove their heavy burdens, will give them back all the white men have taken away. And I laugh loudest when I think that full payment will be exacted for each crime these hundreds of years has witnessed."

"You really believe in a wave of lava swallowing up all of white blood, then?"

"It may be a wave of lava, or it may be a blasting breath from the lungs of the Messiah; I do not know just what. But I know that it will be death to our oppressors, that the slaves will be masters, then!"

"And your family, Silverblade?"

"The red blood in their veins will prove their salvation."

"But not your father?"

"He is warned, and if he is wise, he also will be saved," declared the young man, but with his bright eyes drooping and his voice softening a bit. "I have told him, what I now repeat to you: Flee, while there is yet time! Flee far from here, and pause not until the broad ocean rolls behind you! Only that can save you! And not even that, if you delay your flight many more hours!"

"This isn't what you learned at Carlisle, David," frowned Donaldson, shifting his position uneasily. "Come, don't be a fool, man!"

"I was a fool. I am now a man—a red-man!" and the Shoshone drew back a pace. "I was a foolish child when Luke Woodbridge sent me away to the school at Carlisle. I was still a child when I left school. I was yet a child when I first heard of the Indian Messiah. But now—I am Silverblade, the Shoshone!"

"And a follower of— Can you say who yonder painted fellow who calls himself the mouthpiece of the Messiah, really is, Silverblade? Can you look a man squarely in the eye and swear that you believe he is the Messiah-sent prophet he claims to be?"

That glowing gaze dimmed, those proud eyes drooped, a look of doubt and even grief came into that finely-cut visage; but he made no reply.

The Border Beagle laughed softly, yet with fully as much pity as of scorn in his tones.

"You are too honest to act a lie, David, and I'm glad of it. You're not altogether spoiled by these vile tricksters, and—"

"Stop! If you have charges to make, put them into plain words!"

"You wouldn't believe me if I were to do so, David, and so— Ask your prophet to show you what lies under that mask of paint. Whisper the name of Zeno!"

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Once again the hollow reverberations of the war-drum came rolling across that ridge, and Silverblade leaped back with a low cry.

CHAPTER IV.

FOUND, IN PLACE OF FINDING.

"THE Messiah has spoken unto his prophet!" cried the young Shoshone, with a wave of his right hand as he turned and sprang swiftly up the steep. Flee, while you may!"

"Stop! David Wood—"

"Only a bullet could stop him now!" interposed Horton, grasping the cowboy and checking his pursuit. "It's no use, pardner, and you might as well call it a day's work and knock off for the night!"

"But his mother—"

"He meant all he said when he declared he had no mother, no family, no anything but this new Messiah. Until his eyes are opened by powder and lead, he'll cling to that man—you hear that, pardner?"

Across the ridge floated faint yells as of angry men, and, brave as he undoubtedly was, Max Donaldson shrunk back, no longer resisting the arm that urged him toward their not distant horses.

"You've done your level best, pardner, and I'll bear witness to that when pretty Little Sure Shot asks for her brother. But if I'm to do that, we want to be pulling foot mighty lively, now I tell you!"

"You think they'll give us a chase, then?"

"I think it'll not be the fault of their prophet if they don't do even worse than that!" as he twitched his reins free, then leaped into the sad-

dle. "Big dollars to little cents he's cursing his wits for not acting quicker!"

"He called you—what was it?"

"The Border Beagle, and unless I'm 'way off my base, there isn't another dirty knave in all this land who has better reason for calling me by that title!"

"You know him, then?"

"Mind your nag, pardner!" as the animal stumbled over a loose stone. "It's riding we need most, just now. If Silverblade read that drum aright, thoseimps will be swarming in this direction before many more minutes!"

There was nothing like a road, and not even the semblance of a trail to be seen, but Big Horn Buck led the way with all the confidence of one who thoroughly understands what lies in front, as well as that to the rear. And while riding at speed, over such intricate ground, there was no chance for talking more.

Already those ominous cries had died away in the rear, but Buck Horton did not check his pace because of that. There are times when silence is far more to be dreaded than uproar, and while this might not be one of those occasions, it was a good rule to keep on the safe side.

For full half an hour that rapid pace was maintained, and though there were no signs of pursuit, for at least another hour Horton kept riding too rapidly for anything like connected conversation, though Max Donaldson plainly betrayed his wish for a consultation.

"Keep it bottled, until I tell you to pull the cork, pardner," the Border Beagle said, almost harshly. "I can guess at least a part of what you want to ask, but I want time to decide just how much I can tell you."

"Not a word, if you can't trust me, sir," with a touch of hauteur.

"I'm thinking whether I can trust myself, not you, pardner."

As they rode along, the cowboy stole frequent glances into that strong, far from ugly face at his shoulder.

It was the face of a man who had seen something more than three decades, at least one of which had been passed in wild and stirring adventure. Just now the lines written by those ten years of peril were plainly visible, for Horton was very grave, almost gloomy of countenance; but at other times his bright, honest smile smoothed away all such lines, and a stranger would hardly guess his age at more than twenty-five.

His figure was well-proportioned for both great strength and activity, lacking a couple of inches of reaching the six-foot standard, and weighing in the neighborhood of one hundred and seventy pounds.

His cheeks were smooth-shaven, but mustaches covered his upper lip, and an imperial decked his strong, square chin. Contrary to the commonly accepted idea of a plainsman, his hair, brown as his eyes of chestnut, was worn short, outlining his well-balanced skull.

His garb was a combination of cowboy and townsman, composed of substantial material, well adapted to roughing-it.

About his waist was a belt of cartridges, which also lent support to a stout knife and brace of navy-size revolvers.

In a leather sling at his saddle-bow hung a Winchester repeating rifle. On the other side swung a neatly coiled lariat, while the bearskin pouches back of the saddle bulged out as though well supplied with necessities for one who was often called upon to pass the night without other roof than the vault of heaven to cover him over.

Max Donaldson was hardly less agreeable for the eye to rest upon, and to some he might have presented an even pleasanter picture. He was younger, just entering his twenty-fifth year. He was handsomer, if regularity of feature alone be taken into consideration. He looked far more amiable, too, just then: his smooth skin, hardly bronzed by the sun, his neatly trimmed mustaches and goatee, his big blue eyes, his long hair, slightly curling at the ends and yellow as corn silk.

It was the face of a cowboy dandy, and his garb was in keeping, though still bearing traces of his awkward tumble down that rocky steep into the Shoshone camp. Yet those who knew him best, said that when the right time should come around, never a man wore beard who could or would fight more desperately than this same cowboy dandy.

The sun was nearly setting when Horton broke the silence which had reigned so long, by saying:

"What was that you said about John Godfrey, to Silverblade, Max?"

"That he ought to be at home, if only to kick out a dirty snake that has no right among decent people!" came the angry response.

"What's the matter with your own foot coming into play?"

"You don't know—" hesitated Donaldson, a flush creeping into his almost girlish face.

"I'll be wiser when you make open confession, pardner. Or, shall I give a guess? Grim old Luke frowns where he ought by good rights to smile. Hit or miss, pardner?"

"You might have made a wilder shot, that's a fact! I'm not ashamed to own up, Horton; I'm dead gone on David's sister!"

"And David knew what he was doing when he said there were those at home who could guard all beneath its roof. And—your paw, pardner!" leaning across in the saddle to clasp the willing hand—"if I had time for such sweet follies, I'd be strongly tempted to envy you your success, but—"

"If it only *was* success!"

"It will be, never fear, old fellow! I'm a bit of a prophet my own self, and I say it; you stick to your knitting, and let old Luke's frowns turn to smiles, for they'll be there when the preacher is called in to do the tying. For, of course, Little Sure Shot is all right?"

That bright flush answered where lips declined. Max Donaldson had naught to fear on that score, or his brightened face told lies.

"And this John Godfrey, what is he?"

"A snake in the grass, or I never saw one!"

"With an eye on the dainty morsel set apart for his better, eh? Do you know, pardner, I feel just in the mood for prophesying a little bit more on my own hook; and here goes:

"John Godfrey will not trouble you much longer. He will take his departure from your modern Eden. Very likely he'll try to kick, but I'm no true prophet if kicking will hinder his going."

"You know him? You're after him, then?" eagerly asked Donaldson.

"I know a fellow who has taken to calling himself John Godfrey, just as I know another whom I came mighty nigh calling Zeno Godfrey, back at the Shoshone camp."

"You surely can't mean—"

"Then what's the use in wasting breath talk about it?" was the blunt interruption, as he quickened his pace, riding along at a more rapid rate, as though preferring silence to further speech.

By this time the sun had sunk out of sight, and the twilight was deepening, but Horton still led the way with the readiness of one perfectly familiar with his surroundings, and not another word passed between the couple until, half an hour later, the Border Beagle abruptly drew rein.

"What is it, Horton?" asked Max, in a guarded whisper.

"A fire of some sort, Over yonder. A tree or bush hides it, just now, but—it means something, sure, these days!"

"It's hardly another ghost dance, or there'd be howling to kill!"

"It may be even worse than that. Back out, softly. We'll light and tie, then decide on our next step."

They halted near a couple of small trees, partly surrounded by bushes, and after listening for a minute or so, without hearing aught to strengthen their suspicions, they dismounted, hitching their horses after the "scary-time fashion," by looping the reins over a slender branch above their heads, where a single jerk would set all free in case haste was called for.

"What do you reckon it amounts to, Horton?" asked Donaldson in a whisper.

"That's what I want to find out. It may amount to nothing worth wasting time over, but—I say, pardner?"

"Well!"

"You asked about how I connected your snake with my false prophet, a bit ago. Now, I'll tell you this much: I believe they are father and son, and that they have a gang of only less evil imps skulking somewhere in this neighborhood."

"You surely can't mean it, man!"

"All right, if you think so. Now—cork in! We'll see what this bit of fire stands for, at all events."

Horton moved ahead. Donaldson was forced to maintain silence for the present. He could hardly believe his own ears, and yet—

With a master of woodcraft, such as Big Horn Buck proved himself, and a follower who was no mean tracker himself, it was not a difficult matter for them to reach a point from whence a fair view of the fire was won; but that seemed to be their only reward.

"Deserted, for ducats!" softly whispered the cowboy.

"Don't take too much for granted, boy," in the same guarded tones. "Steady now, and we'll take a cruise around the edges before deciding."

Not a sound betrayed their progress, though they made a complete circuit of the deserted camp, keeping keen watch away from as well as toward the center. But, when their first stopping place was gained without discovering aught, even the Border Beagle seemed satisfied that further caution was a waste of precious time.

"The nest is warm enough, but the birds have flown," he said, rising erect and stepping toward the fire, now burning low. "Let's see if red hawks built it, or if they were merely buzzards!"

"Shall I make a flare to see by?"

"No need, pardner," as he picked up an empty pint flask. "Whisky is common enough to both red and white, but never a red-skin would fling away a glass bottle simply because it was empty. Come, back to our nags, pardner! If I think it worth while, I can find this place to-morrow."

Together they left the deserted camp, returning to where they had hitched their horses. But before they could touch rein or saddle, the bushes vomited forth a number of dark shapes, and both men went down, almost side by side.

CHAPTER V.

LITTLE SURE-SHOT.

THE shaggy little cur seemed trying to shake every joint of its body asunder as it paused, divided between the delicious scent just ahead, and the knowledge of what was expected by that which was just behind him.

Staring at him from yonder low patch of brush were several black points, bright and seemingly as insensible as so many beads of jet; but never a dog of purest pedigree could better tell than this dingy brown mongrel what wonderful springs of life and force lay waiting below those unwinking eyes.

They were so near! The cover was so thick and tangled! Surely he might—as once before since his careful training began—by one headlong leap, lock his watering jaws about a mottled throat, and—

"Steady, Finder!"

If ever a dog invited strabismus, Finder did, then and there. He tried his level best to keep one eye on those motionless beads, while twisting the other around for a glance at the fair speaker whose voice just then came floating toward him through the forest. His shaggy body shook as with an eternal earthquake. His froth-fringed lips stretched and contracted by turns, with a barely audible explosion, not unlike the rising bubbles on a kettle of boiling mush. But that mad temptation had vanished; though so long ago, he could still feel the stripes which had caused his poor ribs to smart because of that breach of discipline.

"Good dog!" added that pleasant voice, as its owner came near the spot where the mongrel was holding his game stationary. "Now, Finder! Put 'em up, lad!"

What a transformation! That bundle of brown hair seemed to explode, and take on the shape of at least a dozen dogs, all of them shooting into that tangle of dead yet leafy boughs, every paw in the swarm trying to pin fast such of those chuckling fowls as might escape those clashing jaws! And even a full dozen of throats could hardly have sent forth such a marvelous combination of howls, yelps, barks and other sounds for which cold type possesses no equivalent!

With a whir and a clashing of strong wings, the covey of full-grown but still young grouse broke cover, leaving behind them an eddy of dry leaves and broken twigs as a veil to hide for an instant poor Finder's chagrin at the result; a result to which no amount of experience could reconcile him.

A wild flurry for a single breath, then the grouse settled upon the limbs of the nearest tree, standing stiffly erect, those bead-like eyes once more looking for and seeing naught but that animated package of shaggy hair, out of which came such strange sounds.

"Talk to them, Finder, good doggie!" once more came that voice, and as its owner stepped into sight, the mongrel rallied from his bitter disappointment and leaped about under the tree where the grouse had sought refuge, yelping and barking fit to split his red throat.

If they had suddenly become petrified, the birds could not have stood with less motion, never once noticing that trim, graceful figure as it moved leisurely to one side, marking each

bird of the covey and its relative position. Then, pausing where an opening among the leafy background caused one head and neck to stand out like a silhouette against the blue sky, the little rifle came up until the ivory bead tipping the foresight showed white against the head of the bird.

A sharp yet slight report, a whir of feathers and beating wings as the grouse came through the lower branches, a howl of fierce delight from Finder, a rapid click-clack as the checkered slide worked, throwing out the empty shell and placing a fresh cartridge in the chamber. And even before the bird fairly struck ground, those bright blue eyes were glancing through the open disk of the Lyman sight at another grouse.

Only pausing to shift position in order to take the lower birds, Finder's owner made shot after shot, each report causing a fluttering fall, though never a bird could have felt a pang of pain, so surely was each bullet sent home, so completely was each brain shattered by those little pellets of lead.

And yet this merciless marksman was a marks-woman!

A rarely attractive picture she formed, too, in her half-Indian garb, and nothing could be better calculated to display the fine contours of her figure than this use of the light Colt's repeater.

Enola Woodbridge was just entering her eighteenth year, but she was already a woman in mind and body.

She was barely up to the average height of her sex, but her proportions were so perfect that no one ever gave a thought to that; she was neither tall nor short; she was "just right!"

Her complexion was dusky, but no more so than is often found among those of purely Caucasian breed. Her eyes and hair were black as midnight, but both were soft and lustrous, Indian-like only in color.

"Take breath, Finder," she exclaimed, after her sixth shot, letting the slender barrel sink into the hollow of her left arm. "Enough is good as a feast, and we have that already."

Smothering a yelp by burying his hot muzzle in the warm feathers under the wings of the bird nearest him, lifting and bearing it to the feet of his mistress, Finder obeyed.

Enola flung up a hand, with a laughing shout, but the remainder of the covey never stirred, still under the curious spell which has ended so many of their race. Then, with a light laugh, the maiden once more raised her little rifle, taking a quick aim and firing; not at a bird, but at the rough-barked limb which curved upward before the mother-grouse.

The bark flew off in a tiny shower, smartly sprinkling the old "pheasant." The bullet, deflected by the wood, shot off at a tangent, screaming shrilly. And this combination broke the spell.

"Heck! Heck! Heck!" chuckled the frightened old hen, darting away with a whiz and a whir, followed by her skurrying brood in hottest haste.

"Yap! Yap! Yap!" broke forth the shaggy mongrel, dashing away.

"Steady, Finder!" chimed his mistress, mistaking his meaning; but only long enough to utter that sharp chiding.

"Get out, you cur!" rung forth an angry voice, followed by a scattering of dry leaves as the dog avoided a threatening foot, its bark changing to a yelp, but still angry, still defiant and full of hate.

Enola Woodbridge shrunk away, and even turning as though to escape a disagreeable encounter by actual flight; but before she could act on that impulse, a broad-shouldered shape came swiftly through the fringe of bushes, and a far less harsh voice cried out:

"Then you're not in trouble, Miss Enola? I felt sure it was your rifle I heard, and you shot so fast that I feared you needed help."

"Thanks, Mr. Godfrey, but I am quite able to take care of myself," coldly bowed the maiden, turning toward her game with barely a single glance into that swarthy face.

"Of course you can, unless— Let me do that, Miss Enola!" springing forward and picking up a brace of the grouse, giving a short exclamation of surprised approval as he held them up to where the bullet had taken effect. "All in the head! The Indians did well in dubbing you Little Sure Shot, Enola!"

"Why should I spoil good meat, Mr. Godfrey, when— Quiet, Finder!"

"Why should you keep such a surly cur?" frowned Godfrey, flashing a vicious glance at the dog, who was plainly longing to flesh his white teeth.

"He is friendly enough with me—and my friends, sir."

"Then you don't number *me* among the latter, Enola?"

"You are a stranger, sir, and—please give me my birds. Mother will be wanting me, and I must go."

"You don't reckon *me* among your true friends, Enola?" persisted Godfrey, ignoring her request.

"You are my father's guest. Don't force me to say unpleasant words, Mr. Godfrey."

The man broke into a laugh, harsh and even bitter.

"Like dog, like mistress! You could hardly say less agreeable words than those, Enola, though you spoke for an hour! Then—why do you hate me so intensely, little woman?"

"I do not hate you, sir," slowly but bravely meeting those glittering orbs. "As yet, you have given me no real occasion for hating you."

"Call it dislike, then. I'd sooner it was downright hate, though! Hatred may be changed to liking, or even to love, but—"

"I wish to go home, sir, and you are detaining me. By what right?"

"Well, if it comes to right, Enola, what's the matter with the right any honest man has to tell his love to—"

"Stop!" her little hand flying up as its owner shrunk back, flushing redly, then paling again before those glittering eyes. "I will not listen to such words from your lips, sir!"

"Enola—dear girl!"

"Never dear to you, Mr. Godfrey!"

"How can you help yourself? How can you hinder me from loving you, when I have already fallen victim to your charms, little lady?" laughed the man, dropping the grouse and advancing as she retreated.

"I can refuse to listen to your words, at least, Mr. Godfrey?"

"Enola?"

"Why will you force me to speak still plainer? Must I say that I actually detest you, sir?"

"Don't go quite that far, Enola," his voice suddenly losing its touch of mockery, his face growing graver, almost gentle for the moment. "As a man, I have the right to tell my love. As a woman, you must hear me out."

"I have already listened too long, sir. I do not care for you, nor do I wish your—your regard. Surely this is plain enough answer?"

"It might be for some men, but not for me, Enola. I love you as no other man loved before! I swear that you shall learn to love me, just as passionately. I swear to never give over until you are mine—until the holy father has added his blessing to the knot nature tied at your birth!"

"That blessing will never be given, sir!"

"Then—I can do without it, if *you* prefer it so," laughed the knave, his black eyes glowing redly, his hands going out as though to close upon her.

Enola struck them down with a little gasp of anger, springing back and swinging the muzzle of her rifle between them.

"Keep back, John Godfrey! Dare to touch me, and I'll—Back, I say! Do you wish to make me your slayer?"

"Not with cold lead, little lady," laughed Godfrey, pausing, but with still deeper fire in his eyes. "Kill me with sweet kisses, if die I must! Smother me in your fair arms, my beauty! But—"

"Stop!" her voice low but stern, her eyes ablaze. "You have said too much already, Mr. Godfrey. And now—take a final warning: Go your way, and delay not. Leave this neighborhood, if you care for yourself. For, I swear to tell all you have dared say and do this day, to those who will know how to punish a villain according to his deserts!"

"May I ask to whom you will assign this office, dear girl?" purred Godfrey, his voice never sweeter than then. "To Silverblade, the Shoshone brave? To the brother, who has forgotten his home gods to follow the false Messiah?"

"Let me pass, I bid you, John Godfrey!"

"Or will the mighty avenger be your father? Old, bowed with cares and weight of winters? Already in his second-childhood, and this hour fondly hoping that his chosen friend is winning over the heart of his one ewe-lamb?"

"Will you give way, sir?"

"Yes—this way!" at the same time leaping forward and knocking the rifle from her hands, then clasping her in his arms.

With a wild yelp Finder leaped at the villain's rear, sinking his teeth deep into the flesh. Godfrey uttered a curse as he lashed out with his

free foot. And then a loud voice came from a little distance.

"Enola! Little Sure Shot! Which way, my dainty?"

CHAPTER VI.

MISPLACED MERCY.

"FATHER—help!" gasped Enola, at sound of that cheery call; but her voice was smothered by the strong hand that slipped over her red lips.

With a vicious kick John Godfrey sent Finder whirling over and over through the air, to strike the ground in a tangled snarl, out of which quickly evolved a howling dog, skurrying away in the direction of that clear, manly voice.

"It's your father!" hissed Godfrey, his face so close that his evil breath seemed to scorch her cheeks. "Swear to keep silent! Swear never to even hint at what's past, or—I'll kill him like a dog!"

Enola could not speak, but she nodded, as though to give the oath demanded, and Godfrey, already hearing those rapidly approaching steps, relaxed his fierce grip, muttering again:

"One word of this, and it's his sure death! Remember!"

"Enola! Little Sure Shot!"

"Here, friend Woodbridge!" answered back Godfrey, turning in that direction, hoping to detain the stockman long enough for the maiden to calm herself, at least sufficiently to avert too close questioning.

"What's the matter with—It's *you*, then, pardner?" broke off the father, as he caught a glimpse of the other. "Where's my little girl?"

"Here, father," answered Enola, as she quickly caught up her rifle from where it had fallen when those evil hands grasped its owner.

"Safe and sound, if not quite as sweet-tempered as ever," laughed Godfrey, still further to cover his tracks. "We've had a bit of a row over that cur—bless him crossways!"

"Finder? What's he been guilty of?"

"Oh, just sampling my calf, bad luck to his teeth!" with a wry grimace, as he bent over for one hand to touch the injured member. "If I have gold enough, Woodbridge, I mean to buy that whelp of you, and that before this sun goes down!"

"He's not mine to sell, and Enola—Take care, girl!" breaking off with a cry of wondering alarm at the sudden action of his daughter.

Startled, John Godfrey turned swiftly, to look squarely into the narrow muzzle of the Colt's repeater!

"Up with your hands, John Godfrey!" cried Enola, in clear, stern tones. "Up with them, I say!"

"You forget what I—"

"I never forget!" came the swift interposition. "Stop! dare to touch a weapon, and I'll fire!"

"What the devil—what's this all mean, child?" spluttered the thoroughly amazed stockman.

"Wait, father. Will you hold up, John Godfrey, or must I shoot?"

"You'll sup sorrow for this, girl!" snarled the villain, his swarthy face turning as pale as nature would admit, but slowly elevating his empty hands. "I told you—"

"Far too much to go scot-free! Father, disarm this knave. From behind, please! He's sworn to murder you if I dared tell you of his vile insults, so—"

"Insults? You? Why, you dirty whelp of—"

Choked by his hot rage, Luke Woodbridge gripped John Godfrey by the shoulders, whirling him clear of the ground, then flinging him to earth, flat on his face, dropping with heavy knees upon his back, holding the knave helpless despite his desperate struggles.

"What is it, girl?" growled Woodbridge, flashing a glance toward Enola. "Insults? If he has dared—"

"Disarm him, father," repeated the maiden, still standing with rifle against her shoulder. "Draw his fangs, then we can talk."

"Let up, curse ye!" snarlingly gasped the overthrown knave, keeping up his vain struggles. "'Twas naught but—the cur nipped me, and I kicked—let up, I say!"

"He lies, father," more calmly spoke the girl. "He did kick poor Finder, but that was because Finder fought to save his mistress."

Whether it was the sound of his own name, or because he saw his ever-detested enemy was helpless to resent or punish, the brown dog crept forward and gave another vicious nip, springing

back with a howl of fierce delight as Godfrey gave another volley of execrations.

"Back, Finder!" sharply cried Enola. "Throw them this way, father," she added, as the gaunt settler stripped the rascal of his pistols and ugly-looking knife. "Search him carefully! He's poisonous as a rattler in August! See that he keeps no hidden fangs, father!"

"You've got 'em all," sulkily growled Godfrey, ceasing his fruitless efforts now that he knew he was overmastered. "Now—murder me! Why not, since all this comes of a kicked mongrel?"

"Not yet, father," said Enola, as Woodbridge showed signs of rising from their enemy. "Bind his arms behind his back. Here's my belt; use it! Run no risks, I beg, father!"

Woodbridge complied, much as an awed scholar might obey a stern teacher. Puzzled by the swift charge and denial, he was hardly fit to act for himself, during those first few seconds.

Buckling the belt tightly about both arms, above the elbows, he drew back, lifting Godfrey after, by a sinewy hand gripping his collar.

"Now, then, both o' ye!" he frowned, stepping back a pace after swinging the bound man around to face himself. "What's all this racket kicked up about, anyway?"

"I told you," swiftly spoke up Godfrey, flashing a warning glance into Enola's face, still clinging to his last frail hope. "Finder nipped me. I kicked him—had to do it!" with a wry grimace and forced laugh. "Look at my trousers! Wouldn't you have kicked, too? Made his teeth fairly meet, through the thick, too!"

"Is that the how of it, dainty?" asked Woodbridge, glancing toward Enola, who now stood lightly leaning on the muzzle of her rifle, her red lips curling with a smile of scorn.

"Will John Godfrey make oath to that effect?" she asked, slowly.

"My bare word is worth more than the oath of some others I might name," sulkily growled the villain, with a repetition of that glittering glance. "I have spoken the blunt truth; that is enough."

"Did Finder nip him, 'Nola?"

"I believe he did, Daddy," with a low, amused laugh as she glanced at the blood-stained trousers.

"And you got mad because he kicked the whelp? Was that just, little woman!" half-reproachfully.

"If you knew what he did first, father!"

"What? Tell me all, Enola, and if he has dared lie to me, I'll—"

"I have given you my word that I did nothing to deserve all this vile treatment," coldly interjected Godfrey. "I simply told your daughter that I loved her and asked her to be my wife. Is *that* a crime?"

"There's something more than this," slowly uttered Woodbridge, his keen gray eyes roving from face to face, but lingering latest on that of his daughter. "You make it clear child, What's the worst?"

Bad enough, as he showed in his stern face as Enola obeyed, though the maiden rather softened instead of deepened the tints, warned by that dangerous glow kindling in the eyes of the stockman. And when she came to that final threat of murder as penalty of speech, his strong teeth closed with a vicious click, and one hand shot out to close with a deadly grip on the throat of the bound knave.

"Ye foul whelp!" he gratingly cried, as his free hand flashed forth a knife. "I'll slit the lips and crop the tongue that dared abuse my daughter!"

But Enola, dropping her rifle, sprung forward and clasped his muscular wrist with her hands, bearing the armed hand down and back as she panted:

"No, no! not *that*, father! Don't stain *your* kind hands with such evil blood! Don't kill—"

"Too late, my dainty!" even in his hot rage softening enough to use one of his quaint endearments. "He's too mighty mean to live!"

"And too evil to die! No, you must not—shall not!" struggling as his hand strove to shake off her grip. "Father, for *my* sake!"

"But he abused you, honey!"

"And have I not had revenge? Have I not shamed him? I, a weak girl, to hold him up and—Father, must I keep on begging?"

Woodbridge thrust the half-suffocated villain from him, giving him but a glance as he sunk to his knees, then still flatter along the leaf-carpeted earth.

"Go back home, my dainty," he said, in softened tones, but with eyes flinching from that steady gaze. "I'll read Godfrey a bit of a lec-

ture, and then let him go. Go home, honey. Mammy needs ye, I reckon."

A little hand went up to the heavily bearded chin pushing back the face above it until those deep sunken eyes were forced to squarely meet hers, or else let their lids close.

"Look in my eyes, Daddy," Enola said, almost in a whisper, giving one fleeting glance toward that cowering shape lying on the dry leaves, then fixing all her attention upon her parent. "Now—you will let him go, unhurt, for my sake?"

"Why should I?" muttered Woodbridge, knowing that she was reading the truth in his eyes the while. "He's gone too far! Shall I let him go, scot-free, only to crawl back and try to sting us once more?"

"If he swears to go away and never return?" hesitated Enola.

"You laughed at his making oath, a bit ago, dainty dot," quickly said Woodbridge, catching at that slip.

"He may keep an oath if he knows it's to save his life. And then, if he does attempt to break it, we'll be on our guard, Daddy. Don't you see the difference, dear?"

"Plainer than such a dirty whelp can see it, I'm thinking! Go home to Mammy, dimpling, and let Daddy settle this score, won't you, now?"

"If you promise to spare his life, Daddy, not unless."

"Well, have your way," drawing a long breath, almost of regret. "I will spare his life, though he richly deserves hanging!"

"And—you'll not hurt him—too much, Daddy?" still clinging to his arm, reluctant to take her departure. "You'll send him away, with a warning to never return?"

"Yes, yes! Now go home, and wait there until I come."

As he spoke, Woodbridge shook off her clinging hands, almost impatiently, moving a bit nearer John Godfrey as the man seemed about to rise.

"I'll go, Daddy, but—what do you mean to do with him?" hesitated Enola, after picking up her rifle.

"Not kill him. That's enough for one asking. Go home, I say, and don't leave the house until you see me again!"

When Luke Woodbridge assumed that cold, almost harsh manner, Enola knew that even she could move him no further, and she passed over to where her game was lying, picking up the birds and deftly fastening them to a stout thong, three at each end. With this balanced in one hand, bearing her rifle in the other, she moved away, casting an almost pitying glance toward the knave who had so rudely insulted her.

"Be merciful, Daddy, for my sake!" she ventured to call out, just before passing out of view.

Enola hastened along until some little distance from that spot, her brain as busy as her heart was troubled.

Despite her really striking beauty of face and figure, Enola plainly showed her Indian blood to the outward eye; but that was all she had inherited from her red-skin mother. In heart and belief, she was purely white, and while her temper could flash up hot and fierce for the time being, reaction quickly came, and she was even more ready to forgive, if she could not forget.

She had been angry enough to kill John Godfrey, back yonder. But now—she paused, shiveringly, with a low moan of distress as she tried to imagine what manner of punishment Luke Woodbridge meant to inflict. And then—from that spot, came chillingly to her ears, the shrill, agonized yell of a human being in extremity!

CHAPTER VII.

A BACKWOODS LECTURE, WITH CUTS.

JOHN GODFREY had not been injured nearly as much as he tried to make out, although those fierce fingers had pretty effectually checked his breathing for nearly a minute, before Enola won his release.

Even while lying with but a shivering motion on the dry leaves, after falling, as Luke Woodbridge cast him aside, he was listening and, a little later, watching.

Now that he had fairly felt the grip of the gaunt backwoodsman, he knew how greatly he had underrated his powers. Even on equal footing, he knew that he would find it no easy matter to come off victor; but now—

Disarmed, bound, unable to resent even the sniffing insults of that four-footed mongrel!

He could hardly believe his own ears, as they told him the girl he had so shamefully

insulted, was pleading for his life. Surely 'twas nothing more than mockery? She, half red-skin!

It was this, half-belief, half-fear, that led him to change position slightly, even at the risk of bringing that gaunt demon once more upon his back. And when his eyes were of avail, and he saw that pale, pleading face, still he doubted.

Not until Luke Woodbridge gave his word to do no slaying, did the bound wretch believe. And then, deep down in what he called his heart, he fell to cursing Enola for not exacting still more!

He gathered his legs under his body, then ceased, with a faint moan as of barely conscious agony, for he caught that watchful glance, and knew that Woodbridge, while seemingly entirely absorbed with Enola, was on the full alert.

He mutely cursed the cunning old fellow for not losing himself wholly in that appeal. If he could only get a start! If he could—but his arms were bound behind him, and that demon was gaunt as a greyhound, built for racing!

Not until Enola had passed out of sight, did Luke Woodbridge move toward that cowering heap, but as he did so, John Godfrey rose to a sitting posture, hoarsely panting:

"Don't—haven't you done enough, already?"

"I haven't even begun," was the cold response. "Git up. Or, shall I lend a hand?"

"You've handled me once too often, Luke Woodbridge. Keep off! I'll get up when—Hands off, curse ye!"

Godfrey scrambled to his feet, and under cover of that movement he strained every muscle in hopes of breaking or slipping the bonds that brought his elbows together. In vain. Daintily embroidered though it was—truly a thing of beauty, after its half-savage fashion—the maiden's girdle was far too strong for that.

He caught a glimpse of those sternly glowing eyes, and knew that but one hope remained for him. And with a vicious kick that was meant to cripple or cast down the stockman, he dashed away at top speed, lifting his voice in a shrill, piercing yell which Enola so wrongly interpreted.

If his friends were only nigh enough to hear! Curse them! They should be, for did he not—

A heavy body struck against his back. Two hands gripped his neck, and he went down like a weak man beneath a hungry panther!

"Say you will, eh?" growled Luke Woodbridge, rising again, lifting the bound man with him, then crowding him up against the nearest tree-trunk. "Run off without paying your debts? Yelp again, and I'll slit your tongue to its roots!"

Half stunned, wholly unnerved for the moment, Godfrey leaned against the trunk, shivering from crown to sole, the picture of abject fear.

Luke Woodbridge steadied him in that position with a knee against his back, then used his hands to tear the fancifully-embroidered buckskin hunting-shirt from the bound man's back, ruthlessly using his keen-edged knife to avoid releasing his arms.

With a slit and a slash, he converted the shirt into straps, strong enough to hold a horse if needed. Knotting these together, he lost little time in forming a rope long enough to doubly encircle tree-trunk and man, then drew the knots firmly before stepping back.

"Making believe won't save you, John Godfrey," he said, after one keen look into that face. "Do your bracing up before I come back, and you'll be all the better able to settle your score."

"What—I'm choking!" gasped Godfrey.

"If not, 'tisn't through that lie being too small for any ordinary throat," grimly laughed the avenger, passing away, knife in hand.

John Godfrey twisted his face around to note his actions, and his face flushed purple, then faded to a sickly pallor as he read the terrible truth: terrible enough to even the lowest of knaves, but doubly so to one of his proud nature.

"I'll kill you if you dare—"

"Shut up, unless you're hungry for a root to chew on!" harshly interposed the stockman, flashing a fiery glance over his shoulder, as his keen blade cut through a pliant sprout. "I'll do the talking, when the sign is ripe. Just now—grit your teeth and call up all your sand. You'll need it, sure!"

He passed out of Godfrey's limited range of vision, and the doomed wretch pressed his face savagely against the rough-barked tree, once more wasting his strength in a hopeless struggle to free himself.

Luke Woodbridge was not long absent. He

came back, with a couple of rods tucked under one arm, while he was trimming a third with his knife as he paused where Godfrey could watch his action.

"It's an ugly bit of work, take it all around, John Godfrey," he said, his tones cold and hard. "I never thought I'd have to turn nigger-driver in my old age. And when I last saw you, you were the very last man I'd have picked out as the one to force such a nasty duty upon me."

"What 're you going to do, Luke Woodbridge?" hoarsely demanded the bound wretch.

"Read you a sober lecture, and then illustrate it with a few mighty lively cuts," smiling briefly as their eyes met.

"You don't dare strike me! I'll kill you like a dog if you dare!"

"I don't doubt you'll try it on, but forewarned is forearmed, and I'll never again make the mistake I did when I bade you welcome to my house and board, John Godfrey. I took you for what you claimed: a man, not a devil! I gave you my hand, and thought your grip was just as honest. I gave you of my best, poor though that might seem to one who was more at home in a big city than in the backwoods."

"And now—I tell you, man, 'twas all because of that cur!"

"And I've got that same cur before my eyes," nodded Woodbridge, replacing the knife in its sheath and cutting the air with the last-trimmed rod.

Godfrey shivered at that vicious whistle, the purple blood flashing darkly into his face.

"Don't you do it! Don't strike me with that, I say! Kill me if you want, but—don't strike me with that, I say!"

"You heard me promise my little girl that I wouldn't take your life," coldly said the gaunt giant, testing the rod still further. "It was her heart that spoke, not her head. I ought to have held firm: I meant to have killed you. I tried to send her away for that, but she could read my face too well, and she feared I was too old to meet a man in his prime, like you, knife to knife, or gun to gun."

"You didn't—not a fair fight?"

Woodbridge started, gazed half-wonderingly into the face of his prisoner for a few moments, then tossed back his iron-gray locks with a short, scornful laugh as he read the truth.

"You thought I meant to turn butcher?"

"I know it!"

"I'm glad you let it out, John Godfrey," inhaling a long breath, his bronzed face actually brightening up. "I knew you richly deserved a licking, but I almost hated to strike the first blow."

"I'll have your life if you ever do strike it!"

"Because I didn't know but what there was just a stray spark of manhood in your make-up, ye see," quietly persisted the stockman, turning back a sleeve and laying bare ridges of sinew that explained in part his easy victory over that young and muscular knave. "I ought to have known better, too! Only a perfect cur could have played the part you have played. Only the lowest of the low could have insulted—Ready, you whelp?"

That thought seemed to overpower his forced coolness, and Luke Woodbridge brought the pliant rod swiftly down, to leave a rising wale to mark its course, even through the woolen shirt which still covered those shoulders.

Another shrill, fierce shriek burst from Godfrey's lips as he shivered beneath that blow, but Woodbridge merely laughed, and then said:

"That's not from pain, but a signal to your pals, John Godfrey. I only hope they're nigh enough to hear it. I hope they'll come in answer to your call, for I'll serve 'em the same—or worse!"

Once more the rod whistled through the air, curling half-way around the trunk of man and tree, but John Godfrey gave no sound, save a barely audible growl. He spread his lips and closed his teeth upon a bit of bark, crushing it to powder, tough though it was.

Up to this moment Luke Woodbridge had held his fierce passions marvelously well in check, but now came a change, silent, but none the less terrible.

Blow followed blow in swift succession, laid on with a power that rapidly used up the rods, one after another. He moved his sinewy arm with the regularity of a machine, and when the last rod split down to his hand, that stout shirt was worn to tatters, and blood-spots began to mark its texture here and there.

That first cry was the last, as well. Godfrey must have suffered intensely, but he proved in so far master of himself.

Yet the rough bark before his face was grow-

ing smooth, torn and ground to bits by his fierce teeth. And here, too, spots of blood—from his torn gums—marked each stage of that punishment.

Luke Woodbridge cast aside the splintered stump of his third rod, drawing a mighty breath, his face clearing like one who is breaking away from a nightmare sleep.

"It's over—thank the Lord!" he cried, with involuntary fervor. "Over—and you're not dead! Give thanks for *that*, John Godfrey, for never a man ever had narrower escape from death!"

"I'll kill you for this!" hoarsely gasped the prisoner, then his head sunk heavily upon one shoulder, his muscles relaxing like one in a swoon.

Woodbridge lifted his head with a hand under his chin, then dropped it again, laughing harshly, scornfully as he drew back.

"Bah! why play 'possum, John Godfrey? You've had your lecture, and though you can't very well gaze upon the cuts I promised, I reckon you know they're there, safe enough!"

Striding over to where still lay the weapons he had taken from his prisoner, Luke Woodbridge opened the revolvers, slipped the shells into his pocket, and hurled each cylinder far away into the woods. He still more completely disabled the pistols by striking them against a tree, bending the frames beyond repair. He drove the knife-blade deep into a trunk, snapping the steel short off.

"Now, just one little warning to you, John Godfrey, if that's your lawful name," he said, coming back to his prisoner. "You've sinned, and I've put my brand upon your back. Now—go! Go away from here, and if you love life, never come back! I'll tell my boys this, and if any of them, or if I, ever catch you on my place after this day, you'll die like a crazy wolf!"

Drawing his own knife, Luke Woodbridge cut the bearskin bands that held Godfrey to the tree. As they parted, the wretch sunk in a limp heap to the ground, like one past helping himself, but the stockman only laughed grimly, before saying:

"You know the law: you have until sunrise to-morrow, to save yourself."

CHAPTER VIII.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

WITH an indifference which would have been brutal had he not felt perfectly sure John Godfrey was "playing 'possum," Luke Woodbridge turned away, leaving the spot where a richly merited punishment had been meted out.

The prostrate wretch never stirred, never moved muscle or lifted head until at least ten minutes had elapsed. Then, failing to hear sound of footfall or aught else to warn him that unfriendly eyes were awaiting his movements, Godfrey lifted his head to steal a savage look in the direction Luke Woodbridge had taken.

He could see nothing of the stockman, and after another brief spell of listening in vain, he sprang to his feet, uttering a hoarse, savage snarl as his clinched hands raised to—

"Come back to life, have you?" mocked the stockman, stepping into plain view from behind the broad bole of a tree. "I was beginning to wonder if 'twas worth while to save the wolves from poisoning themselves, by digging a grave to hide you from sight and scent!"

It was too late to pretend weakness, and too soon to give free vent to his vicious hatred, so John Godfrey, staggering like a drunken man, turned his back upon his enemy, and left the scene of his punishment.

With each step his brain cleared and his limbs came more under his control. And before he had gone half a mile, he looked around, almost hoping that Luke Woodbridge was dogging his footsteps.

"Show your face, if you're there, ye devil!" he snarled, looking more beast-like than human, just then. "Man to man, I'm your master, crippled though I look! Show up, I say!"

But there came no answer. And then, as he realized that he was not followed, John Godfrey once more plunged on through the forest, but now with a far clearer idea of where he was going, and what he had to do.

Little by little his hot rage cooled, and then he took thought of his own dilapidated condition. He flinched a bit as he tried to cast a glance along his back, over one shoulder. The contortion caused the tattered shirt to rudely grate along those burning wales. The pain was exquisite, and he gave an ugly curse as he realized that it would be worse before it was better.

"And, worse yet!" he snarled, shivering with mad rage. "I've got to let the boys know of it!"

If I could only hide it from them—Satan grill them alive! Why didn't they come when—why weren't they on deck when needed?"

Unable to do aught to either mitigate his pains or improve his appearance, John Godfrey once more pressed on through the woods, like a man who had some particular destination in view. And as he progressed, his brain was busy, preparing for the meeting which, since they had failed to answer his call from the other rendezvous, he could confidently count upon taking place at no serious distance, either of time or of measure.

When he paused again, it was at a point several miles away from the spot where he had encountered Little Sure Shot, and a prompt response came to his low, quavering whistle, closely followed by the words:

"On hand, boss, like a run-around!"

"But too late for the fair, as usual!" harshly growled Godfrey, advancing to meet the rough-clad, rougher-looking fellows who stepped into full view. "What devil's luck kept you here, instead of being at the other nest?"

"You didn't say which—Holy smoke!" breaking off with a start of genuine surprise as he caught sight of those blood-spotted shoulders. "Hed a rattle with a scratch-cat, boss?"

"Button up! And you, Dirty Dick, patch me up, if you know how!"

He sunk to the ground, with a smothered curse of mingled pain and rage, resting his head on an unsteady hand as he bowed his burning back to the eager hands of the squat, ill-favored knave who pressed forward.

"My 'intment, boss!" spluttered Dirty Dick, as his little pig-eyes took in the nature of the case. "Let me daub it over, an' time it's did, you wouldn't know you hed ary sech a thing as a back fer to—Waal, that *does* git me, now!"

Godfrey had unbuttoned his shirt, and Dirty Dick had drawn it off over his head, and that ejaculation was drawn forth by sight of that sadly marred back and broad shoulders.

Brief time as it had lasted, that backwoods lecture had left an impression which months of wear would not entirely efface.

"Tough, isn't it?" growled Godfrey, with a sickly smile showing his teeth. "Do you wonder I felt hot under the collar when I gave the signal of distress, and you never responded?"

"Ef we'd only ketched it, boss! But—"

"Act, not chatter, curse ye, Dirty Dick!"

Not another word was spoken until the task was completed. And then, when bandages were applied, and his tattered shirt was once more in place, John Godfrey rose up, drawing a long breath of intense relief.

"You're court physician and surgeon extraordinary from this moment, Dirty Dick!" he declared, with a short, hard laugh. "Now—you want to know what manner of scratch-cat gave me these love tokens?"

"Not ef you'd ruther don't, boss."

"Because you think I'm ashamed of them?" laughing once more. "Why should I, boys, when it took four stout rascals to put the stamp upon my back; and all four jumping me from cover, without notice?"

"We know'd no one critter could 'a' done it, boss, o' course," the squat spokesman hastened to declare.

"Nor one dozen, if I'd been given a ghost of a show," scowled John Godfrey, not above telling a lie to preserve his honor, so-called. "But we'll keep moving, boys, for I don't want to stiffen up too soon. And then, too, the plum is mighty nigh ripe for plucking, and we must all get together. I'll talk as we mog along."

It is hardly necessary to follow his words, as they fell from his lips. They consisted mainly of lies, though with a spice of truth running through the story.

And what that story was has been shadowed forth by the sentences already placed before the reader.

Enough that he set forth the case in as favorable a light to himself as an ingenious wit and glib tongue could draw the picture. He admitted that he had pressed his suit a bit too ardently upon the coy half-blood, but declared that Luke Woodbridge, in company with three of his cowboys, had jumped him from behind, without warning.

"Now you know just how the case stands," he added, coming to a halt, after a keen glance around by the waning light, as though to make sure of their present location. "I can't very well go back to the ranch, yet it'll never do to leave it without at least one pair of good eyes to take notes. Jack!"

"Ready, boss!"

"I reckon you can turn the trick the neatest."

Go over to the ranch, and keep your eyes peeled. Keep under cover, but don't let any items slip your eyes. And if Luke Woodbridge should pull out, afoot, see that you track him wherever he goes."

"Bet I will, boss! But ef he takes a critter?"

"If he strikes out north, follow until you can give a fair guess how long a ride he means to take. If he strikes south, toward the Indian camp, follow his track until opposite the lower rendezvous, then hurry to let us know. You have it down?"

"Straight as a string! Shell I pull-foot now?"

"Then the trick hain't to be turned jist yit?" ventured Dirty Dick, before Godfrey could speak.

"Hardly this night. Yes, rack out, Jack. I'll give you a few dollars extra for this extra work, of course."

"Ef I git a honest grab at the old buck's pile, I ain't keepin' count o' the extrys, boss," chuckled the withered rascal, as he turned and glided swiftly away into the deepening shadows.

"I'd feel a heap sight happier to heart ef we was gwine 'long!" sighed Dirty Dick, watching that fading shape until it vanished. "Why couldn't we four turn the trick, boss?"

"Honor among—gentlemen, Richard," laughed Godfrey, once more moving onward. "And then, too, it may call for just a bit tougher fighting than four stomachs can easily digest. Don't forget I'm shut out, now, and the latch-string pulled 'way in! Of course I took thought of such a possibility, and I trust they'll not discover my bit of work before the time is fully ripe for action. Still, it's barely possible, you see, and we've got to take everything into consideration."

"They can't be no mistake 'bout the dingbats, I don't reckon, boss? They'll be thar, safe 'nough, won't they?"

"Why not? They were there this noon, and Daddy Luke never dreams that I'm a bit the wiser. Be sure he never opened his head to me about the yellow-boys, though he seemed dead stuck on—devil grill him by inches!" with savage hatred, as a burning twinge shot across his scarred shoulders.

"Good Lawd; I'm so mighty hot fer a grab, that every breath I suck in seems a mile long! An' I bite 'em off turrible short, too, jest in hopes it'll hurry time 'long quicker."

"You'll enjoy the feast all the more when the right time comes, then, Dick. But now—shut chop! You've a voice sweet as a hungry burro, lad, but I've got a mighty poor ear for music, just now!"

Dirty Dick—who apparently did the talking for both his mates as well as for himself, lapsed into silence for the time being. He had not known this chief very long, but that space was sufficient to warn him against flying flat in the face of orders, even though they might be given with a purr, instead of a snarl.

In spite of his keeping in active motion, Godfrey found himself growing stiff from his flogging, and this fact by no means tended to sweeten his temper. Only a man of unusually tough constitution could have borne up so long and so well, but he knew he was nearing the limit, and that he must have both rest and quiet if he was to remain fit for the perilous work his evil brain had so carefully planned.

He was thankful that the end was now so near. A few more minutes would bring them to the rendezvous where the remainder of his tough company were to be found. Once there, with his hurts newly dressed and more carefully bandaged, a night's rest would make another man of him.

But he was not to reach that rendezvous without further excitement, as it proved.

He sent forth his low, quivering signal, pausing for a reply. None came at once, and he lifted hand to lips for a louder repetition, when Dirty Dick uttered a guarded hiss of warning.

"Critter crawlin' over—"

"It's you, boss?" came a low whisper floating through the gloom.

"Yes. What's up?"

"Two critters, tryin' to spy out our camp, boss," replied the shape, resolving into human form as it rapidly crept closer. "Hitched tha'r critters jest over thar, then snaked off, Injun style."

"Where are the other boys?"

"That's *our* side o' the joke, boss," with a husky chuckle. "Lucky we ketched the tromple o' huffs, an' skun out o' the light, to see who was which, an' why so? Then—boys 'bushed nigh the hosses, waitin' to shoot when they come back," hastily, as his master made a gesture of impatience.

"Why shoot? Who are the two men?"
 "Waal, Tom said one was a Max somebody, but—"

"Good enough!" with fierce joy in his low tones, moving forward. "If it's Max Donaldson—"

"That's the name, boss, fer sure!"

"Show the way—on eggs, mind ye, all! Quick! if a shot is fired without my aiming it, I'll eat raw meat for breakfast—sure!"

They were quickly at the ambush where three stout knaves were waiting for the two scouts to return for their horses, but they were none too soon. Hardly had John Godfrey passed word to burn no powder, but to leap upon and capture alive, than Big Horn Buck and Cowboy Max came back from their nearly fruitless quest.

Then, without sound or warning, the trap was sprung upon them.

CHAPTER IX.

A KNAVISH OUTFIT.

WARNED by their chief in advance to make sure work, the rascals struck as they came, and the two unprepared scouts went down as much from those strokes as because of the living weight hurled against them.

There was no time for burning powder or fleshing steel. Strong arms locked about them, while other hands sought for and found their throats, checking outcry and lessening resistance at one and the same time.

Still, it was no meek submission those ambushed knaves received. If they won, they had to fight hard for the victory. Though they were three to one, with all the advantage of a complete surprise in their favor, the result was not certain until, after several minutes of fierce suspense on the outside, John Godfrey forgot his stiffening hurts and took a hand in himself.

"End it—but alive!" was his repeated cry.

Perhaps if this idea had been less steadily kept fresh in the hot brains of those panting, wrestling, struggling fellows, the outcome might have shown a more lurid tinge, for the two men fought desperately, full of silent grit as bulldogs, neither asking nor giving mercy.

If they had won free enough to draw and use their weapons—but they did not, and so the inevitable came to pass.

"Gi' me room!" gasped Dirty Dick, staggering dizzily on his recovered footing. "I hain't had—a full drink o'—wind fer 'n'our!"

His mates were slower, or more cautious. The two men lay there, bound hand and foot, helpless to either fight or flee had they been still fresh and unwinded, but doubly impotent after that stubborn battle against odds. And yet their captors seemed afraid to draw back, lest the conquered turn the tables upon them.

Even John Godfrey tested the thoroughness of that binding before he made sure his savage hopes had not failed him. But when he saw that his knaves had done their work most thoroughly, and that the two men were helpless, he slouched his hat over his face to shield it from the glow of the match his fingers struck, then passed the little flame before the face of each one of his captives.

The reddening end dropped from his fingers and he started back with a strange combination of sounds: too much for a smothered shout of joy, too gleeful for a curse of rage. A sound that joined both, with still other emotions: an evil medley that caused him to break into a wild dance of triumph as soon as he drew clear of his gang.

"What's bit ye, boss?" ventured Dirty Dick, holding himself ready to offer aid, or to dodge a blow, as the outcome rendered advisable.

"That's all right," growled Godfrey, returning to himself with almost ludicrous celerity. "Maybe I'm dancing because I feel happy! maybe I'm howling mad because we've wasted so much time and good wind raking in what isn't worth the trouble!"

"Then they hain't—"

"Button!" with still another abrupt change, his tones growing harsh as they were subdued. "First thing, muffle their eyes. Don't let 'em have even a glimpse of a mug amongst ye all! Don't talk over a whisper in their range, and even then alter your voices as much as possible. Understand?"

"We hear what ye say, boss, but ef we know what ye mean, I'm durned ef I do!" spluttered Dirty Dick, dubiously.

"Do what I say, and let sense drill a way through your thick skull when it can," gruffly added the chief, moving nearer the two horses which still remained tethered, too well trained to break away, though that fierce struggle had taken place so near them. "Blind 'em both for

the present, then tote 'em a bit nearer the camp. I'm not just certain what we've got to do with 'em, first-off."

He lingered nigh enough to be sure his orders were comprehended, then passed over to where the camp-fire, the glow of which had so sadly decoyed the two friends from the path of safety, was still showing its ruddy bed of coals.

Godfrey cast a few dry sticks upon the fire, watching until they broke into a blaze, then moving back until he sunk down upon a spot to his liking, smothering a groan and curse of pain as that action sent a wave of torture across his bruised shoulders.

"If you only knew how the score is mounting up against you, Luke Woodbridge! When I come to wipe it out—may you live until the last figure is balanced!"

By the growing light John Godfrey could distinguish his men as they lugged the bound forms of their prisoners nearer, and his lips were on the point of parting with a warning sound, when both men were dumped at the base of trees close together, just beyond fair range of the camp-fire.

"How's yen' fer posish, boss!" asked Dirty Dick, bustling forward, a wave of his dingy paw pointing his meaning. "Ef it's too nigh, or not fur 'nough off, why—jest 'say so' cures the job!"

"Neither of 'em can see what goes on over here?"

"Never a wink, boss!"

"All right. I'm not so sure it matters, after all, but business is business, and we're its prophets."

"An' them profits is dead sure, boss? Don't reckon thar's ary danger o' them dingbats borry-in' wings fer to skip afore we kin nail 'em? Don't reckon—"

"It don't need reckoning to tell me I'm hungry as a starved wolf, Dick," bluntly interjected his master. "Rustle up some grub, can't you? I never could chin on an empty stomach, and mine—well, your skull is the only thing in nature I can compare it to!"

Dirty Dick skuffled off with a grin and a chuckle, as in duty bound. Like king, like courtiers. And, after his own fashion, John Godfrey was a king to that knavish outfit.

A couple of guards were sent out to give warning in case other outsiders should chance that way, though such a happening seemed highly improbable. Still, what had happened once, might very well happen again, and the stakes they were playing for seemed high enough to warrant a little extra trouble on their part.

Provisions were produced from some quarter. Half-dried meat was soon toasting over the coals, and a blackened pot was soon emitting the grateful scent of strong coffee.

While others were providing for the inner man, John Godfrey had Dirty Dick looking after his hurts, renewing the soothing application of ointment, the manufacture of which was a carefully guarded secret, though the squat ruffian sung its manifold virtues in and out of season.

It really possessed some merit, since Godfrey already felt better than he had dared hope for. And with more conveniences at hand, Dirty Dick finished his task in a more workmanlike manner, grinning with brutish delight when his master warmly thanked him.

"Not me, boss, but the 'intment! Ef a perfect thing kin be said to have a fault—jest one fault, ye mind! Ef sech a thing *could* be, the blame o' my 'intment is that it cures its cures up too pesky quick!"

"How so, Dirty?"

"Waal, 'fore a critter hes time to 'preciate what it's doin', it's done a'ready! An' so—waal, when they're cured up so mighty quick, I've knowed dum' fools come to think they never wasn't nothin' the matter 'ith 'em, fu'st-off. See?"

"Well, I'll promise not to sin after that fashion, Dirty," laughed Godfrey, seeming in particularly good humor despite his bruised shoulders. "Grub's ready, I reckon? If not, we'll call it so, and make a beginning, anyway!"

For some little time all speech was suspended, though jaws were wagging briskly. All were hungry, and none averse to showing as much.

The flogging he had received, did not lessen Godfrey's appetite, and the frequent glances he cast toward their two prisoners, seemed to sharpen his teeth still further.

Having eaten heartily, he produced and loaded a pipe, Dirty Dick bringing him a glowing brand from the fire with which to light the tobacco. Then, reading in faces what tongues

hardly dared ask, Godfrey broached the subject which was uppermost in every mind there, unless it might be his own.

"Business dispatched, you want a dose of pleasure, eh?" he said, his dark eyes passing swiftly from face to face. "All right; no time like the present, and as the plum is ripe enough for picking, I'll paint it in its true colors as a preliminary feast for your eyes."

"You all know, more or less well, the Woodbridge ranch and its people. You know, too, from my telling, that Woodbridge has just filled an army contract, or, rather, has recently drawn his pay for supplies furnished from his stock-farm. He has the cash under his roof this moment: just five thousand dollars, in clean gold!"

He paused, because he had to. Those greedy knaves could not have heard his voice had it been lifted, so strong was their avaricious joy. And John Godfrey smiled grimly as he watched and listened, showing no anger even when the two guards came in without leave, eager to share in that feast of anticipation, if not reason.

"Never mind now how I found all this out—enough that I'm responsible for the truth of each word I'm speaking," he added, when calm was once more restored. "I picked you fellows up, and promised you then, what I promise you now—every dollar of that pile shall be yours, if you care to take it!"

"Boss?" ventured Dirty Dick, almost timidly.

"Say it, flat-footed, Richard O'Grime."

"Waal, 'course it's all right, sence *you* say so, boss, but—what's *your* sheer come in at, ef we're to clean grab it all our own selves?"

"In plainer words, you reckon I'm entirely too generous?"

"Waal, don't it kind o' look that way, boss?"

"No doubt it does to you, because you can't see anything beyond the glitter of those yellow-boys," half-sneered the arch-villain. "But you needn't borrow trouble on my account. I'm not filling your pockets simply because I love you—though that goes without saying! You're men and brothers, and all that, but—I'm another, if not more so, in my own eyes! And so—here's the meat o' the nut, gentlemen!"

"You claim the money, because that stands highest in your estimation. I claim the girl, because I deem her a jewel beyond price. If I am content with my share, surely you hadn't ought to kick?"

"But, boss, she's jest a gal, ye know," hesitated Dirty Dick.

"And because she is jest a gal, as you put it, I'm more than willing to take her as my share of the immediate plunder. Still, mind you, I don't say that's all I expect to win out of the job. You're to have the gold, and anything else that strikes your fancy as being worth the trouble of carrying off when the raid is made. Only one thing is tabooed—Little Sure Shot."

"She's your meat, boss, o' course."

"Of course. Now I'll say just a little more. You know the racket that's being kicked up. You know that an Indian war is almost a certainty, and that before the first snow flies. And you know, too, that young Woodbridge—Silverblade, he now calls himself—has already broken away from home, to join the ghost-dancers."

"Well, it's ten to one that the young hot-head gets his light snuffed out. If the soldiers don't do it, then—never mind! He'll never come back to ask questions, be sure of that!"

"Old Luke is all white, so he'll never join the Shoshones. His wife is all red, so he'll never fight against her people. That puts him betwixt the devil and the deep sea, and I'm open to lay long odds he'll never live to see the curtain go down on the farce—a bit bloody, maybe, but still a farce!"

"Do you begin to see through the shell, gentle knaves? With Little Sure Shot as my legal wife—for it's well worth the trouble, when you come to look at all sides of the question—who'll come in as chief winner? Your humble servant, or I don't begin to know myself! J. G., or I haven't rightly appraised the value of Woodbridge Ranch, lot, stock, and good-will!"

With a low, amused laugh, Godfrey noted the effect of his speech.

CHAPTER X.

A MAN WITHOUT MERCY.

DIRTY DICK put on an expression of unbounded rapture, his pig-eyes rolling finely, but his fellows showed more truth if less acting. They could not yet see through the fog as clearly as they wished.

"Don't you see it?" mocked Godfrey, reading their looks aright. "And yet, to my eyes, it's plainer than daylight. And all it needs to set it

in motion, is for the right hand to give the pot a bit of a stir."

"You mean to jump the ranch, then?" asked another of the party.

"Sure! And if old Luke comes out of the racket in talking order, set me down for an idiot!"

"He'll make a tough fight, if he's given the chance."

"Of course, but that won't save him. And when he's gone—for Silverblade don't count—the girl will be sole heiress to all his stock and lands. That's good enough for me, without a share of the gold!"

The lank knave shrugged his narrow shoulders, laughing harshly.

"She's half-and-half, but still the girl's too white to ever kiss the hand that's reddened by her father's blood, boss."

"Who'll tell her that? Teach your grandmother the art of sucking eggs, Frinkle! If a gang of tribeless red-skins jump the ranch, and make a clean sweep, and I come on the stage just in time to snap the little beauty out of their lawless clutches, what more natural than for her to reward me after the regulation fashion?"

"Go soak yer head, Frinkle!" exploded Dirty Dick, catching his cue and making the most of it, according to his custom. "Set yourself up to show the boss which is t'other? Scat, ye critter! I'm heshamed o' ye, so I be, now!"

"You shut!" with an angry glance in that direction, then again facing the chief, with:

"You mean—just what, boss?"

"That the ghost racket needs a push in this quarter. That things are kept to a sleepy simmer entirely too long for the good of gentlemen of fortune, like myself. And so—we'll give the pot a stir, and charge it all to the red-skins. See?"

"We're to jump the ranch, rigged out like Injuns? We're to leave the place painted Injun fashion, then?"

"Just so, dear fellow," bowed Godfrey, with a grim smile.

"And what about the two fellows over yonder?" with a nod toward the tree where Big Horn Buck and Max Donaldson were bound fast.

"Who do you reckon they are, Tom?"

"One of them is the fellow they call Cowboy Max," replied Frinkle. "I knew him at sight, and I'd hate mighty to give odds he don't know me as well, if only from the feel."

"You're right; one is Max Donaldson, pet of at least one member of the Woodbridge family," his brows contracting with the words. "But if he's well worth all the trouble it cost to put him in limbo, what price ought men of our caliber to set upon his mate?"

"You know him, too, boss?"

"I know him; yes! And I doubt if there's one among you but what knows of him, if only by reputation. Did any of you ever hear tell of Big Horn Buck, the Border Beagle?"

There was no need of words, though nearly every pair of lips parted with ejaculations of surprise and anger, if not of actual fear. Their faces spoke still more eloquently, however.

"Horton is his real name," added Godfrey, seeming to find pleasure in refreshing their memories. "He got the title of Big Horn a good many years ago, through scenting out and running down a gang of stock-lifters in the valley of the Little Big Horn River. And that exploit, together with a number of others, equally daring, (for I'll give him so much credit,) won for him the rest of his long handle. And unless my information is false, he's still playing the part of a beagle along the northern border; in the revenue service, I hear."

"He'll not stay in it long, boss, unless you tie my hands!" viciously grated Tom Frinkle.

"You don't exactly love him, then?"

"I had a brother in that outfit, and when the racket was over—well, there was a halter around his neck when I found him!"

"Is that so?"

"It just is, boss!"

"And if I were to say: 'Tom, work your own sweet will on Buck, from Big Horn?'"

"Try me, and see!"

"Maybe I will, in the end," said Godfrey, rising painfully to his feet, slowly straightening his bent back and stiffened shoulders. "I'll not say for sure, until after I've had a look at the gentleman who—Fire and furies!"

Dirty Dick had just cast a handful of dry twigs upon the fire, and as the bright light spread swiftly, John Godfrey turned his eyes toward the prisoners, to start back with that harsh cry.

In some manner as yet unexplained, Big Horn Buck had slipped the bandage from over one eye, and that was quietly taking in every detail of

the camp-scene. How long this inspection had lasted, could only be guessed at, but Godfrey knew that his own face, cast into full relief by that ruddy glow, surely had been photographed by that keen eye.

Dirty Dick saw the same thing, and with cat-like swiftness he leaped across the space, jerking the bandage back to its place.

"He must 'a' rubbed it off 'gainst the tree, boss," he muttered, as he came back. "But what matter? He don't know any one o' us!"

"He knows we are white," scowled Godfrey, but beginning to rally from that disagreeable shock, now that his back was turned and that keen eye hidden from sight. "If let go free, he'd fall to work putting two and two together. Then—what?"

"Devil a care I care," grunted the squat knave, shrugging his broad shoulders. "All I ax is to git my share o' the yaller boys, an' then he kin figger all he likes, fer me!"

"So you think now, Dick, but I tell you the globe wouldn't begin to be big enough to lend you a safe hiding-place, if the Border Beagle once makes up his mind to strike your trail."

"All right," with another shrug. "Let him croak, then."

"Give me leave, and he'll never take another trail, unless it's his own: and that will end at his grave!" viciously growled Frinkle.

"Why not?" nodded Dirty Dick. "Tom's played Injun plenty 'nough. He kin git his even-up, an' yit leave things so it'll be nother black job to score up ag'inst the reds. Why not, I say ag'in?"

Tom Frinkle flashed out a knife and took one leap toward the two helpless prisoners, but paused, then recoiled, as John Godfrey stepped between with uplifted hand.

"Don't you be in a rush, pardner."

"You said—didn't he spot us all?" snarled the ruffian, showing his yellow teeth in a wolfish grin of hatred.

"It looked that way, but—who knows?" Maybe he hadn't time to make any dangerous discoveries, after all.

"If you see fit to run that risk, you've no right to make others share your peril," sulkily muttered Frinkle, checked, but far from being resigned.

John Godfrey laughed, softly.

"You reckon I'd let him go scot-free, Tom?"

"It looks that way, I reckon."

"Looks are mighty deceptive, sometimes, Thomas."

"Then—give me five minutes with that bloodhound, and you can have my leavings!"

"I fear I could put them to no good use," with another hard laugh. "But, don't jump over the traces, Frinkle. Because I hold your hand now, that's no sign I'm wholly in love with Big Horn Buck."

"Then—I can salivate him, after all?"

"Wait a bit. Maybe we can put the whelp to some use, before shutting off his wind for all time. Even if we can't—well, it's a poor hand who does work for himself, when another can do it for him in heap sight better style."

With that enigmatical morsel for his cogitation, John Godfrey left Tom Frinkle to nurse his hatred after his own liking, passing over to where the prisoners rested with backs against the trees to which they were securely bound with their own lariats.

He stood in silence before them, for a brief period. Neither moved or gave sign, though their ears must have warned them of his coming.

"Well, Big Horn Buck Horton," at length spoke up Godfrey. "How do you reckon you feel, just about now?"

Silence. Neither prisoner stirred, neither one spoke, though their lips were uncovered.

"Big Horn Buck, I say!" repeated Godfrey, leaning forward far enough to lightly slap the face of the elder man.

"Who's he?" Horton asked, with a start and involuntary shrinking.

"Have you forgotten your own name?" sneered Godfrey.

"Why should I forget it?"

"Why didn't you answer to it, when called?"

"So I will, when it is called. But you said—Big who?"

"Big Horn Buck, with Horton for a continuation, and Border Beagle for a finishing tag. Ever hear of the gentleman?"

"I've heard that he was a— You're not him, though!"

"Of course I'm not, since— But, why do you speak so positively?"

"Well, I've always heard say that Buck Horton was a white man."

"And you don't think I'm white, then?"

"Is that free leave to speak the blunt truth, stranger?" hesitated the prisoner, like one doubtful as to the prudence of freeing his mind of the weight upon it.

"Call it that, if you like. What makes you think I'm not white?" persisted Godfrey, curious to learn just how far his captive would carry the comedy.

"Well, a white man acts white, don't he?"

"No doubt, when it's to his own interest."

"And a white man wouldn't bounce a stranger behind his back, without asking yes or no, would he?"

"In the style we bounced you and your mate, of course?"

"Just that," with as much of a nod as his bonds would permit. "How had we injured you? What had we done to deserve such treatment?"

"Wait a bit. What were you playing spy for?"

"To see what was to be seen, of course," with a half-laugh. "We were making for Woodbridge Ranch, when we sighted a fire. We knew—as you must know—that the red-skins are growing monstrous uneasy, of late, and as this gent belongs to the ranch, and we couldn't tell but what the Injuns were plotting mischief that way, why—we tried to find out. Is that a deadly crime?"

"Not if it were truth, but being a lie, it's too near a crime to have any fun in it—for you, now you're caught!"

"Then you're playing in with the reds?"

"Lie number—Bah! I've lost count! You play it down fine, Big Horn, but you've gone in too deeply for simple lying to bring you safe ashore."

"My name is Mark Short. I'm a cowboy and bull-puncher, out of a job. I met up with this gent—I'd give ye a regular knock-down to him, if I knew your handle, or his, for that matter."

"Never mind. I fancy we can worry along without that ceremony, and if we never met before—"

"We've met just once too often, John Godfrey!" hotly broke forth Cowboy Max, losing sight of prudence in his strong hatred for the man.

"I'm glad you realize that plain fact, Donaldson, for it'll save wind when I get around to your case. As for you, Buck Horton, I not only know your name, your past record, your profession of bloodhound in the United States Revenue Service, but I also know just why and for what you have come to these parts. Now, knowing all this, one word: where and to whom shall I report your death?"

CHAPTER XI.

OMINOUS PREPARATIONS.

"I RECKON you mean it as a favor, by your note, strangers?" half-asserted, half-asked the prisoner.

"It's a favor I'm more than willing to show you, Big Horn, at any rate. What address did you whisper?"

"You needn't mind. I'd heap sight rather my friends never found out in what nasty company my last hours were spent."

John Godfrey broke into a coarse laugh, that was not wholly counterfeit. This was more like the person he firmly believed had fallen into his power, and ruthless as he could show himself on occasion, it would be easier to destroy an open enemy than a declared neutral.

"More like it! The genuine Big Horn twang, at last! You are Buck Horton, safe enough, old man, so why not confess?"

"You feel the need of a lying pardner, then?"

"I'm digging after the truth, instead, and you know it!"

"You won't see it when I point it out, so what's the use?" with a note of weary disgust as his head settled back against the tree to whose trunk he was roped. "I'm Mark Short, out of a job, and I was making for one when you roped me. That's all I can tell you, if you want the plain truth, though you keep on chawing wind for a season."

"You are Buck Horton, called Big Horn Buck ever since you rounded up the Prickett gang, in Montana. You're the Border Beagle, and your range is back and forth along the line, above. Shall I tell you what business brought you this far down?"

"Not by my asking, stranger. If you're stuck on chinning, I can't well hinder, unless—I say, stranger!"

"Say it, then."

"If you really feel the need of something to kill time, why not take off these hobbles and turn me foot-free?"

"What would that benefit me?"

"Well, I don't say it'd make you any richer, or even any handsomer, but I *do* reckon you'd know a heap sight more about fun than you do right now!"

"In still plainer words?"

"I'm just beginning to feel like pawing dirt! It takes me a considerable spell to raise my dander, but when I *do* come, it's head up and tail a-switching! I'm just a lone maverick, hoofs travel-worn and both horns splintered to the rings, but with blinkers off, and room to beller, I can stampede both you and your outfit!"

With the last word, the prisoner flung himself against his bonds so desperately, that Godfrey sprung back, involuntarily dropping a hand to grasp a revolver: for the first time seeming to remember how completely he had been disarmed by Luke Woodbridge, when the closing fingers failed to clutch the familiar butt.

"Roped with my own *riata*! I know it by the feel! I say, stranger?"

"What is it, Buck Horton?"

"Ain't you playing it just a bit too low down on a fellow, making him furnish both subject and rope?"

"We'll hang you with another, and that'll balance the score. And *you*, Max Donaldson, what can—"

"Go shake yourself!" interrupted Cowboy Max, unable to play a part before one so thoroughly detested. "I'll even-up with you, John Godfrey, if it takes a lifetime!"

"Well, if that lifetime means your own lease, you've got to 'tend to your knitting mighty steady, Max, o'd socks!" laughed the other, turning away from the two captives, apparently abandoning all hope of winning the ends which had brought him there.

"You don't reckon thar's ary mistake, boss?" ventured Dirty Dick, sidling toward his master, much as a whiffet approaches a bigger dog, in whose friendliness he feels strong doubts.

"Them's um, eh?"

"They're the fellows I spoke of, yes," nodded Godfrey, moving along toward the spot he had occupied before eating.

"And you'll let me have my whack at Big Horn, boss?"

"What would you do with him, if I stood aside, Frinkle?"

"Make him wish he'd never been born!"

"I'm not so sure of that," smiling grimly as he shook his head, sinking gingerly to the ground, then producing pipe and a plug of tobacco. "You think you would, just now, but once you had the chance, I'm betting odds you'd catch a glimpse of your brother in the halter, and—well, it might be an even-up, so far as life goes, but it'd be over a mighty sight too quick for *me*!"

"You hate him, then? You don't mean to turn him loose, boss?" eagerly asked the vengeful knave.

"I *do* hate him, and I've good cause for doing so. I'll not turn him loose, with life in his body. And—Frinkle?"

"Yes, boss?"

"If I hold your knife back, it's simply because I reckon we can snuff that candle heap sight more scientifically!"

Frinkle lingered, far from satisfied, but Godfrey was busily cutting bits of tobacco from the hard plug with his pocketknife, then grinding the fragments still finer with his knuckles as they lay in the hollowed palm of his other hand.

"Must I wait—how much longer, boss?" Frinkle at length asked, showing some degree of timidity, however.

"Until I'm ready to move," came the gruff response. "Don't bother me now. I'm studying it all out, and the more you—Scat!"

Frinkle beat a retreat, but squatted down in a spot where he had an uninterrupted view of the man whose life he so bitterly thirsted for.

"That lets me out! With those eyes on guard, Big Horn Buck might as well abandon all hope of giving us the slip. And so—how would the trick work? And—is it worth the trouble to try it on?"

Shifting about until he found the position easiest for his sore back, John Godfrey let his chin sink upon his chest, closing his eyes and smoking slowly, lost in thought.

During the first hour or so, frequent glances were cast that way by his anxious followers, but not even Dirty Dick cared to risk any questions.

"Ev'ry man to his own notion," quoth that grimy philosopher, in subdued tone as time crept along, "but my idee is like this: All eyes wide open, an' clapper takin' a rest. 'Course it don't call for the hull gang to watch two hobbled critters, but when a boss is raked over

the back—turribly 'g'inst the grain, too, I tell ye! When things is gone *that-a-way*, I say, I'm keepin' safe side o' the 'vision fence!'"

With all his faults, Richard was no fool, and his wakeful example was followed by his mates. They scattered around as each one saw fit, and took their ease as far as disturbed minds permitted, but none of them closed an eye in sleep, and they took turns in standing guard.

There was little probability of an enemy putting in an appearance, but such had happened once, and might happen again, for all they could tell to the contrary.

Despite his quietude, broken only when his pipe required replenishing or refilling, John Godfrey slept not; and when the night was considerable more than half spent, his busy thought bore fruit, and he rose to his feet with a cry that brought the gang around him.

"We'll shift our location, boys," were his first words. "Which of you can spare me a gun and knife, for good pay?"

Offers came from each man, and Godfrey took his choice, electing with a judgment that spoke well for his experience in weapons. And this preliminary being effected, he issued his orders, briskly enough:

"Two of you pack up all portables, for we'll hardly come back here right away. The others—put those two fellows in marching order."

"Foot, or critter-back, boss?" asked Dirty Dick.

"Make 'em walk. It'll limber up their muscles, and we've time enough for what's before us."

Half an hour later, the camp-ground was deserted, and a little procession was winding its way over tangled ground, heading to the west.

All were in the saddle, with Godfrey leading the way, save the two prisoners and Tom Frinkle.

Both Horton and Donaldson had their arms snugly bound behind their backs. Their legs were unhampered, of course, but a lariat was looped about each neck, the slack leading to one of the horsemen. And Tom Frinkle of his own choice, acted as "whipper-in."

It gave him a little scope for revenge, if only through pricking up the captives as they hastened along at the tail of the horse to which they were a pendant.

None save John Godfrey seemed to know whither that journey was to carry them, and not even Dirty Dick ventured to ask questions. But all felt that it had an important bearing on the doom of the two prisoners, and, as those luckless fellows toiled along, even they began to wish that the ending might come.

Possibly Godfrey enjoyed their torture too much to cut it short though he said never a word, cast never a glance backward at his victims; possibly the rough hature of the land called for it all; be that as it may, he led the way with many a crook and turn, heading in different directions, though keeping a general course toward the west.

In this manner the remainder of the night was nearly spent, before he called a halt, leaving his saddle with the air of one who has at length reached the destination held in view throughout.

"Let 'em lay, lads," he said, as the jaded prisoners sunk to the ground, worn out by their terrible trip through the night. "Frinkle can keep an eye on them. I want the rest 'over here."

He drew apart, where the faint murmur of voices alone told the captives of speech going forward; and then a fire was kindled, the growing light of which told the captives they had been brought near the brink of a precipice, though its depth could only be guessed at, as yet.

As his men set about carrying out the instructions he had given them during that brief withdrawal, John Godfrey came back to where his prisoners were now sitting, the lariats still looped about their necks.

Brief as had been that respite, they had in a degree recovered from their breathlessness, and there was nothing of fear in the eyes which noted his coming.

"Remove their cravats, Tom," with a nod to Frinkle. "Take away the nags, but leave the ropes. We'll have use for them by the time day begins to peep. Now—how do you like it, far as you've got, gents?"

"None the better for having a share of your wind," grunted Horton, curling his nose and averting his face. "Have you brought us so far, just to smother us?"

"Don't you believe it," laughed Godfrey, low-

ering his frame to the ground before them. "That's old. We're original, or nothing. We've concluded to dispose of you after—guess at the fashion, won't you, Big Horn?"

"Don't gratify the devil by swapping words, pardner," sulkily muttered Cowboy Max. "He's past shaming, and we're too white to beg!"

"You say so now, but when—Ready, lads?" turning his head at the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Ready fer to make a beginnin', anyway, boss," grinned Dirty Dick, dropping his end of a freshly cut pole, some twelve feet long and about three inches thick at the smaller end.

"How'll this fit in, boss?"

"Neat enough, I reckon," with an approving nod. "It's not so much the stage properties that matter, since we'll take good care to have the actors letter perfect in their parts. I say, Dick?"

"All ears open, boss."

"I don't ask if you ever wore the army blue. You're too neat, too clean, too prim and precise for that! But, you've been within eyeshot of a military guard-house, I judge?"

"Bet I hev—an' inside o' more'n one, too. Contraband whisky."

"I thought as much, from words you let drop at odd spells. Well, did you ever hear of such a thing as buck-and-gag?"

"Done see'd 'em, an' done felt 'em, too, boss!" with another grin.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEED OF A DEMON.

"BETTER yet! I'm acquainted with the theory, but since you're up to the practice, go ahead!"

"On these critters, boss?"

"Of course. Handle them gently, for I'm above offering damaged goods to even—Never mind who or what, just at present. Do your work, and do it up in true military style, Dick!"

Dirty Dick was nothing loth, and with several stout fellows to carry out his instructions, the task was quickly accomplished.

First taking the precaution to tie the feet of each man together, lest they make an effort to break away when their arms were freed, the last mentioned members were released, brought around in front, to have stout thongs wrapped around the wrists and firmly knotted.

Then, with actual force, since neither Big Horn nor Cowboy Max were men to lighten an enemy's labors, their knees were drawn up until they nearly touched chin. The arms were bent at the elbows, separated widely enough to be slipped over the knees and down as far as the shins.

Then two men held the prisoners in a sitting posture, while the others forced the trimmed pole under each pair of knees, and over each brace of arms, thus leaving the prisoners utterly helpless, and in a position which would quickly become torture itself.

"That's what it means to be bucked and gagged," chuckled Godfrey, as Dirty Dick handed him a couple of rough rolls of cloth, tied around with leather thongs. "You're bucked. You'll be gagged in due time. And then, what comes next, do you reckon?"

"I know what'll come to *you*, if ever I get out of this hobble!" said Horton, his rage at last getting the upper hand. "I'll hunt you off the face of the earth! And if I can't find you above ground, I'll scent out your grave, and drag you forth to poison wolves with!"

"Did you ever take time from your trailing to study out the length, breadth and thickness of that big little word '*If*?' Big Horn? But 'if' deals with the future; and this is the present, old bound!"

"Get it over with, you cur!" gratingly exclaimed Cowboy Max.

"In a hurry, eh?" laughed Godfrey, shifting his position a bit, so as to more fairly face the cowboy. "But I'm in no mighty rush. I'd lose half my get-even if I sent you over on your last trip without blowing at least a portion of the fog from your muddy brain. So—have you never a last word to send to Little Sure Shot, dandy duck?"

"Name her not, you devil! I'll tear your—Oh, for just one fair grip at your vile throat!"

John Godfrey laughed loudly, his face more that of a demon than a human being, just then. This was a foretaste of vengeance, and he was Indian enough by nature and training, to fully enjoy it.

"Now you shut, pardner," muttered Horton, in turn. "Talking's no good, since we can't back it up."

"Sensible to the last, Big Horn! I'll carve

those words on your tombstone, if the hair isn't too thick and the hide too tough," laughed Godfrey, though his eyes snapped angrily as he saw Cowboy Max lock his jaws, in evident obedience. "Besides, I'm just running over with talk, and I'll agree to do enough for all hands."

"To begin with, my precious friend, let me beg you to borrow no trouble because of Little Sure Shot. I'll see that she hasn't time in which to grow lonely, and I'll keep her so well occupied that I doubt if she even wonders what's become of her dandy cow-puncher!"

"I'm not at all modest when everything is sailing my way, Max, old boy, and hence it comes that I'll own up squarely that you did rather hold the bulge on me, up to date, so far as pretty Enola was concerned."

"I know that *you* popped, and I know that *she* gave you back a much softer, tenderer, sweeter explosion. And since I can speak thus calmly concerning the little slips made by my destined wife, you can guess how fully assured I am that she'll never sin again after that fashion—with Max Donaldson as an accomplice!"

This was torture bitterer than death, but Cowboy Max kept his jaws locked, saying never a word, though he felt obliged to close his eyes.

He could not meet that devilish leer and keep his peace.

"Sulky, eh? Sorry for you, Max, but, truth is mighty and must prevail. It's gospel I'm slinging at you in chunks, and if it likes you not, fault fate and not your humble servant. And so—being gospel, who has a better right to a liberal dose, than those whose doom is sealed, whose tomb is even now hungering for them? Literally hungering, too, though you may not exactly understand what that means!"

"You see, old fellow—which includes Big Horn, of course," with a curt nod toward the second prisoner. "You see, being on my way to the wedding, so to speak, it irks me mightily to even think of coming before my bride with red hands. And so—I've elected a deputy, and he or she—I'm not dead sure just which one will come to the funeral-feast first, you see!—is waiting for the offering."

Godfrey broke off abruptly at that, for he felt a burning gaze on his face which involuntarily drew his eyes toward Big Horn Buck. And what he read in those glowing orbs, caused him to draw back and spring impatiently to his feet, casting a glance toward the east, now showing a ruddy tinge which spoke of a new day.

"Enough chin, and now for a spice of devilry!" he ejaculated, lifting a hand in command. "Gag them both, and do it up brown. We'll have music enough without their chirping, never fear!"

His order was quickly carried out, though it called for actual force before those locked jaws could be pried apart far enough to insert the gags.

When these were firmly knotted in place, Godfrey made another signal, and the confiscated lariats were snugly fastened, one to each end of the pole on which the prisoners were "bucked," side by side.

"Over with them, my gentle lads!" cried Godfrey, harshly, waving a hand toward the not distant escarpment. "Do it smoothly as possible, but if an accident *should* happen, it'll be providence bears the blame, not us. Over with them, I say!"

This was no easy task, with such a weight, so peculiarly distributed, but after the heavy burden was once fairly over the edge of the cliff, at a point precisely indicated by the chief villain, the rest came more easily.

Godfrey stood a little to one side, leaning far over the edge, peering downward like one searching for some particular spot, and guided by his words, the task was finally completed.

The rocky ledge was of no great height, after all, and as the helpless victims were only lowered a part of the way to the bottom of the narrow gulch, or canyon, the lariats proved long enough to suspend them in the chosen position, and yet had slack sufficient to tie around the nearest tree.

"You really reckon it'll pan out right, boss?" muttered Dirty Dick, drawing a ragged sleeve across his damp brow.

"Why wouldn't it work?"

"Waal, I hain't ketched no music tunin' up as yit. An' so—ef *you* say so, I hain't gwine to do no kickin', boss!"

"That's a resolve good for your health, Richard," nodded his master, with a grim smile, as he drew back a little from the edge of the precipice. "As for its working to a dot, I'm pledged. I know they are dangling directly in front of the entrance, hardly out of paw's length

from the little bench. I know that a mountain lion dens in there, for I sent a she inside, with a bullet-gash across one haunch, only two days ago."

"Course she wouldn't hunt safer quarters, boss?"

"Hardly, since I heard the miauling of her cubs, just after she vanished. Reckon she clawed 'em a bit, to even-up as best she dared. I'm not exactly a coward, if I do say it myself, Richard, but I come away without trying to enter and yank madam out."

"Durned ef I blame ye, boss!" with a wry grimace. "They're no turrible shakes when ye ketch 'em out in the open, but when to hum—waal, not any in mine, thank ye, ma'am!"

Tom Frinkle had been listening to each word as spoken, but now he came forward, his face brightening up marvelously as he spoke:

"You really mean it, boss? They're to hang there until the lions jump 'em both?"

"I surely do, Frinkle. Why? Isn't that enough to satisfy even your thirst? Think of it, man! Think what they're suffering, even this soon, although I took care not to drop a hint of the whole truth in their way! They're already suffering worse than death, the way they are trussed up! And then—"

"If they'd only begin!" snarled Frinkle, without waiting for more, but throwing himself flat on the ground, with head and shoulders thrust over the edge of the fall, his evil eyes fairly ablaze with hatred and fiendish longing, waiting for the bloody sport to begin.

"Wake me up if the circus opens before my eyes, do," yawned Godfrey, moving back under cover of the trees hard by. "And don't let Frinkle spoil sport by trying to hurry it up, Dick."

Despite his sore shoulders, the villain was soon lost in slumber, as were all of his men save Dirty Dick and Tom Frinkle.

Last of blood kept sleep from the eyes of the latter, while his mate seemed able to live without closing his eyes, when the occasion arose.

Together they kept watch over the doomed men suspended in front of the lion's den, but the sun was well up before a sound came to indicate an inhabitant of that den. Then, however, just as Dirty Dick was drawing back in huge if smothered disgust, a low, moaning sound came upward to their ears.

"The lion, by glory!" panted Frinkle, his bloodshot eyes flashing anew. "It's coming! Rouse the boss, Dick, and—"

"When the show begins to show, not afore," was the gruff response. "He needs sleep, a'ter that turrible lacin' he ketched, an' I'll git him on deck in plenty time. Never you fret, pardner."

From time to time that strange sound, now faint, now clear, but ever proceeding from the same quarter, came to their ears; but a full hour more crept along without the beast making its appearance in front of its den.

Just as Frinkle's patience was giving out, there came a hoarse cry from the slope to the right, and turning, they caught sight of the withered frame of Jack Dunks, the man whom Godfrey had sent to act as spy around Woodbridge Ranch.

"Whar's the boss, an' be durned to ye!" he cried, pantingly, as he drew nearer. "Why didn't ye leave—"

"Ha! you, is it, Jack?" exclaimed Godfrey, springing to his feet, then reeling dizzily with the pain that sudden movement caused in his lacerated shoulders and back.

"What's left o' me, boss," in milder tones, though a scowl was still marking his wrinkled visage. "I've pritty nigh run my hind legs clean off o' me, trailin' ye up, boss!"

"Out with it! What's wrong?"

"You tell! My part's this: old man tuck boss, an' rid on the keen jump, down Injun-camp way."

"How long since?"

"Last night. Not much afore the middle, I reckon."

"Before midnight! And here it is almost noon! You lazy devil!" his hands gripping fiercely as he started forward.

"Go easy, boss!" cried Dunks, shrinking back but speaking swiftly: "I was at the camp in plenty time, but you'd gone, an' left no sign."

"Curses on my forgetfulness! But it can't be mended, now. Quick, lads! No time to lose! Luke's gone for his boy, and he'll fetch him back, too! Maybe with a gang o' reds to back 'em up! On saddle! We've got to get there first, or it's all day with your divvy!"

"But the devils down yonder, boss?" scowled Frinkle, reluctantly leaving his lookout. "The lion's snarling, right now!"

"Then she'll make quick work of them, be

sure. We can't wait for that, but we can come back if all goes well. Now—*git there!*"

And he was the first man to cross leg over saddle.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRUTH AGAINST SUPERSTITION.

JACK DUNKS, the spy sent to Woodbridge Ranch by John Godfrey, told the truth so far as his light went: Luke Woodbridge did take horse an hour or so before midnight, and did ride "hot-foot" in the direction of the Shoshone camp, where he had good reason for believing his wayward son, David, might be found.

All white though he was, the stockman loved his Indian wife as dearly, as truly, as entirely as other men love their wives of equal blood; and when, on this night, her illness seemed to take a turn for the worse, and she began calling for her "little brave" to come to her side, he could no longer resist. His pride went down before his love, and leaving Enola to watch over the wife, he took horse and sped away in quest of the son.

This was what he had sternly sworn never to do, after parting with David the last time: David no longer, thanks to the mad dreams which had come into his brain of late!

For himself, that oath would never have been violated, but for the mother—

"That's different!" he muttered while riding rapidly forward, never so much as thinking of such a thing as being dogged, though he might have made that discovery had his brain been less troubled, less deeply absorbed. "He hasn't had time to grow *all* bad. He hasn't forgotten his *mother*, though he may his father and sister. 'Nola said—what?"

He found it difficult to keep his thoughts straight. There was an ugly buzzing in his brain that wrapped everything in a mist. And so it was that he had to repeat that question to himself, over and over again, before the right answer came.

Enola had confessed to Luke that she had asked Cowboy Max to seek out David and beg him to come home, because of his mother's sickness. She had been expecting them both, but—

"She's wasting time, that way, my dimpling! The boy'll never listen to Max, where he was deaf to his father. He'll never come—What?" flinging back his head much as he had done a few hours before, when he confronted John Godfrey. "Never come, when mother wants him? He *shall* come, if I have to pack him, like a fat sheep!"

Luke Woodbridge showed scant mercy to his good horse, pressing it on as rapidly as the darkness and the nature of the ground would permit. He rode as only a natural horseman can, and was pitiless only in that one respect; he would not pause until his destination was reached, and his mission made known.

Jack Dunks, all unsuspected, kept within bearing, if not within sight, until nearly opposite the rendezvous where he expected to find his chief and his mates. The spy was disappointed, as shown, and the same fate awaited Luke Woodbridge some time later: he, also, found but a deserted camp!

The "mouthpiece of the Messiah," taking alarm at that involuntary visit of the two pards, had given orders for camp to be shifted, lest they suffer from the curse which already kept company with all of white blood.

Of course Luke Woodbridge could not know this. He knew that the camp had shifted, and that was misfortune enough to fill his anxious soul with dark forebodings.

"How far? Which way? To join those cursed Sioux?"

The very thought turned him sick and faint at heart. He had parted with his son, coldly, harshly, yet never before had he loved the young fellow so ardently as then, when red blood smothered white teaching, and red instinct mastered white reason.

"I am *all* red! I am Silverblade, son of Weenamoo, grandson to He-That-Fights-Long! I am no longer David. I am he who follows the New Messiah!"

So the young man—nay, but a boy!—before he left him. Now, whither had that mad delusion led him? If south, to unite with those never satisfied Sioux!

Luke Woodbridge almost fiercely choked back the groan that tried to rise to his throat. He left the saddle and quickly shaped a torch with which he might inspect the immediate vicinity of the camp, and at least learn the direction taken by the departing company.

That was easy to find, and as he followed the trail, plain and broad enough, as though those who left it behind them, had no fears of being

hunted, here and there he noted facts which would have escaped a less practiced eye. And the further he went, the lighter grew his worst dread, for he was growing almost sure this meant but a change of camps, not a migration south to join the hostiles.

And so it proved, though the sun had risen before Luke Woodbridge came upon that camp. Doggedly as he had persisted, and plain though the trail was, torchlight tracking is slow work when the trailer has to pick up material as he goes along.

Luke Woodbridge was in the saddle when he came into view of the new encampment, and his ears had warned him what to expect, long before his eyesight was of avail.

Squatting in front of the Medicine Lodge, holding the long drum of hollowed wood between his knees as he hammered the dried hide tightly stretched across its top, was an old Indian. In the cleared space before him, a score or more young Indians were circling to the left, their curved fingers interlocked, one with another, their heads thrown back and their glassy eyes staring upward, their feet stamping in time with each drum-beat, their voices mingling together in hoarse, monotonous chant, broken now and again by a wild screech of frenzy.

Here and there lay or stood single figures, but Luke Woodbridge hardly noticed them. He had caught sight of one of those dancers, and believed in it he recognized his son, hideously painted, wildest of the wild, a picture which filled his heart with savage grief.

With a hoarse shout he spurred his horse forward, one hand flung upward in token of amity, but the other gripping the butt of a revolver.

"Father! Why are you—"

One of those solitary figures sprang forward with a sharp cry, but stopped short, feet as well tongue. For a single breath he had been David, now he was Silverblade!

"I want you, boy!" cried Woodbridge, something like a red mist flashing in front of his aching eyes as he saw his mistake; as he knew that his son had not formed one of those hideous dancers. "Your mother—"

"I have no mother. I am no longer a boy," coldly declared Silverblade, but advancing with rapid strides until he stood between his father and those startled, angered dancers.

Well for Luke Woodbridge that the medicine-man was absent from the new camp! If he had been present, the lightest word from his lips would have brought about an ugly tragedy.

"Peace, brothers!" sternly cried the youthful convert, waving an open palm toward the others, more than one of whom had grasped and even drawn deadly weapons. "There is nothing to fear from this man. He seeks Silverblade, and his eyes are blind to all else. Is it not so, Luke Woodbridge?"

"Devil fly away with 'em all!" harshly muttered the stockman, his eyes full of angry disgust as they flashed over the gathering. "Come with me, David. Your mother is sick, and she's calling for her boy! If we make haste, we may be in time to— Your horse, boy!"

Silverblade grasped the reins, turned the horse's head, then walked briskly away until the camp was hidden from sight.

"Never mind me, David. Get your horse and come! Didn't you hear what I said? Mother's sick—she may be dead this moment."

"If so, her soul is under the sheltering wing of the Great Spirit," gravely said Silverblade, his head bowing for a brief space.

"But she sent me—she's calling for her Davie, all the time! I've ridden with red spur—see!"

But the young man was not looking toward the foot thrust out in evidence. His keen ears had caught another sound, and his swift turning toward that quarter, caused Luke Woodbridge to glance the same way.

The bushes parted, and the painted face of the medicine-man looked doubly hideous as a band of bright sunlight fell athwart it. Then, his mask of paint wrinkling with a sardonic grin, the bushes divided to permit the passage of his body.

"Are you losing faith, so soon, child of the Mother Snake?" he demanded harshly, paying no attention to Luke Woodbridge, after that one venomous glance. "Are you turning your back toward the New Messiah?"

"He's turning back on the devil and all such imps as you!" hotly cried the stockman, losing sight of prudence in his impatience. "He is my son, and he has but one mother. And that mother is calling to her child from her death-bed!"

"Be it so! There will be one the less for the Messiah to swallow up with his death-wave."

"Peace!" almost savagely muttered the youth,

stepping between the two men. "Touch him not, Luke Woodbridge. Do him no harm, father," with a slight bowing of his head toward the medicine-man.

Although it was not so calculated, that sign of submission cooled the fierce rage which boiled up in the stockman's heart. And when he spoke, his voice was even, his eyes upon his son, ignoring that painted tempter just beyond.

"David, have you forgotten the mother who bore you? Will you not hear to her voice, when it begs you come? She is dying, boy!"

"Silverblade, child of He-That-Fights-Long! Will you turn from everlasting life, in favor of eternal death? Will you prove false to the red blood that binds you to the Messiah?"

"David, will you listen to a devil, rather than hear your mother calling her boy? Will you stay here, and let her die, calling in vain?"

"If Weenamoo dies now, she will rise again when the Messiah comes! Let Silverblade listen to the truth, not turn his ear to the false hissing of the tempter!"

"She turned her face from me, David. She would not be satisfied even with her little girl. She kept calling amid her moans and gasps of pain, for her boy—for her little Davie!"

"Shall the Messiah hear no response when he calls aloud the name of Silverblade, the Shoshone? When he asks why this is so, shall he be told a white cur had sucked away the red blood, leaving Silverblade but a traitorous pale-face?"

"Saut up, ye devil from hell's deepest pits!" hoarsely cried the white man, once more losing his forced composure. "I'll tear your lying tongue out by the roots if you dare stand between a dying mother and the son she's begging for!"

So terrible was that face in its just anger, that the medicine-man sprang back a pace or two, a sharp cry breaking through his lips: a cry which brought an instantaneous response from the ghost-dancers. And as one man, the Indians came rushing in that direction.

"Stop them, father!" sternly cried Silverblade, drawing closer to his father, each hand whipping forth a revolver. "I am Silverblade, but he is the husband of Weenamoo, and she is my mother! Stop them, or—"

"We'll have plenty of company, David!" laughed Woodbridge, his face filling with the true battle light. "And I'll take you first, devil!"

The loss of an instant would have cost the medicine-man his life, and just as certainly doomed both father and son to death at the hands of that rushing crowd of fanatics. But Silverblade caught the stockman's hand, forcing it lower, until the pistol muzzle touched his own bare breast.

"Through my heart, first!" he said, with a strange coldness, though his eyes blazed brightly as they looked up to that startled face.

With a gasp of horror, Woodbridge dropped the weapon, but as a low taunting laugh came from the medicine-man, he rallied once more.

"You devil! I'll cheat you even yet! David, are these crazy fools and evil schemers more to you than the dying kiss of your mother?"

But Silverblade had turned to sign back the crowd, crying sternly:

"Stop! you are near enough. The father bids you stop short!"

"Stop, my children," coldly spoke the medicine-man, lifting his hand. "I called aloud that you might be witnesses to the battle between red blood and white. Now, Silverblade, make your choice. Which will you follow: the New Messiah, or this accursed white-face?"

CHAPTER XIV.

A PARTIAL VICTORY.

"WHICH will you follow, David Woodbridge; the hiss of this lying snake, or the dying prayer of your mother?"

The stockman leaned over in his saddle, one hand gently touching the shoulder of his wayward son. But at the same instant, the medicine-man, bold in the presence of so many of his fanatics, stepped forward to grasp an arm.

"Back, ye devil!" snarled Woodbridge, striking that hand away with fierce hatred. "Hands off, I say!"

"He is mine. He is red—all red! You are white, and—"

"What are you, beneath that lying paint? Hands off, I say! If it comes to that, let these poor, deluded wretches take choice between two white men! I am white—so are you! They have known me for years, and some of them from infancy. But you—what do they know of you, as you would show up when robbed of that coat of paint?"

As though stunned by such a swift volley, the medicine-man fell back a pace or two. He even seemed to shrink, to cower; but that emotion was overcome so quickly that one could not be quite sure.

Silverblade, like one drawn by a tie he cannot break, fell away from his father, and drew nearer to the false prophet.

Woodbridge turned ghastly pale at that, but he fought back the sickening sensation as best he might, and made one more appeal:

"Your mother is dying, David. She calls for her boy; shall her death-prayer remain unheard, unanswered? Will you not come home, to mammy, Davie, boy?"

Silverblade shivered from crown to sole. He bent toward his father, then his lithe form swayed back, nearer the medicine-man. He seemed drawn both ways, and without strength to make a final choice.

The prophet laughed softly. Woodbridge gave a low groan of pain.

But he swiftly rallied, and lifting the pistol he still held, mate to the one of which he had been deprived by his son, he pressed the muzzle against his own forehead as he sternly spoke:

"I told Weenamoo I'd bring her son if living; I'll never go back to her alone!"

"Father!"

"Let him go!" harshly cried the prophet.

"Let him die the death! 'Twill be one the less for our Messiah to smother under his death-wave!"

Better for his evil schemes had his tongue remained silent, just then. Superstition might have conquered truth, even at such a terrible cost; but this coarse brutality proved the last feather, and David Woodbridge struck aside the hand that would have detained him, springing to his father's side with the words:

"Hold! don't shoot. I'll go with— I'll go to Weenamoo!"

The medicine-man lifted a hand toward the eagerly watchful braves, but as swiftly dropped it again, without making the fatal signal.

"Go to Weenamoo, then, son of the Messiah," he said, coldly, turning his back upon father and son. "Receive her dying prayer, if you will, but assure her that 'twill not be a long repose. When the Messiah comes, Weenamoo will be among the first to kiss his feet!"

With difficulty Woodbridge stifled his anger, as his son bowed low toward that slowly-receding figure. He knew that his was but a partial victory, but he knew, too, that it might even now be turned into defeat should he risk too much.

In grim silence he rode after Silverblade to where the horses of the party were staked out. In silence he watched Silverblade prepare his animal for the road. This was not the spirit in which he had hoped to return to the sick mother, but—surely it was better than not to return at all!

No further attempt was made to check or delay them, and the two horsemen were not long in leaving the encampment behind them.

For some time they rode in silence, neither seeming in the mood for conversation, and the first word was uttered by Silverblade when, after riding a mile or two, the stockman turned aside from the course he had been following.

"This brings the bad lands to our faces. The other trail is better for horses. Why desert it?"

"It's better for others, as well, boy. A pack of painted devils could cut across and lie in wait for those who prefer smooth riding to rough."

"You mean—" hesitated the youth, frowningly.

"Just that! I've pulled you out of yon devil's jaws, and I don't mean to let you fall into them again, if prudence can help me out!"

"Luke Woodbridge—"

"Have you forgotten how to say father so soon, David?"

Silverblade made no immediate reply. He bent his head and rode on in silence for a few rods. He could feel that burning gaze upon his exposed cheek, but not until he had conquered himself, did he turn in answer to that steady look.

"Let it be 'father,' then—for the present," he said, meeting that half-angry, half-reproachful gaze without flinching in the least. "Why should I make matters worse by acting a lie, father? My belief has not changed since we talked together: or, if changed, it has only grown the stronger. I am right in casting aside all earthly ties, and when you have time to grow calm, when you have looked at both sides of the matter, you will be honest enough to confess as much."

"Then you really put faith in this promised coming of an Indian Messiah, David?"

"I believe in the Indian Messiah, as I believe in my life!"

"And you believe that his coming will be the signal for the death of all who boast of white birth?"

"I believe in that, as well, sir."

"And you are ready to welcome that advent?"

"If it brought me death eternal, still I would welcome his coming, for the sake of all down-trodden Indians, sir."

"Even if that coming dooms your father to death, among the rest?"

"I have no father, save the Indian Messiah. And you, have you not had ample warning? There are other lands than this, the red-man's home. You can cross the ocean, and there you can live in peace and safety. There is room enough yonder for all of white birth, but *here*—this continent belongs to the Indian now, as it has since time began! And when our Messiah comes, only Indians will be permitted to draw breath within its limits."

"You talk as though you really believed all this rot, David," with a half-contemptuous echo in his tones.

"I not only believe, but I know it!"

"How do you know it, boy?"

"By the words which the New Messiah has placed into the mouths of the chosen ones. I know it, just as surely as I would know, had I been one of the favored few to whom the Messiah has shown himself."

For some little time they rode on in silence, both busy with thought. But then Luke Woodbridge spoke again:

"Of course, then, you believe that you painted a knave, who did his evil best to prevent your responding to the death call of your mother, is one of those chosen few, David? You believe that your wondrous miracle-worker has picked *him* out as one of his precious mouthpieces?"

There came no immediate reply. Silverblade hung his head, strong emotions doing battle in his brain, as his changing features plainly betrayed.

That was a question which he expected, yet dreaded. He wished it might have been evaded, but since it had come, he would answer truthfully, if at all.

"You heard what I asked you, Davie?" softly added his father.

"I heard, yes," at the same lifting his head and honestly encountering that keen gaze, though the troubled light deepened in his own eyes.

"And you really believe *that*, as well as the rest?"

"I wish I could say yes, but that would not be wholly true, sir. I have tried hard to have perfect faith in the father, but—failed! I know the doctrine he preaches is pure and perfect, but—I can't feel as sure of the mouthpiece!"

"Good!" leaning across and warmly gripping a passive hand as they rode briskly along.

"That's my Davie, honest and true!"

"I believe in all the rest, though."

"Just now; but—Never mind," checking himself as he felt danger ahead. "I'll explain just why you can't fully trust that prophet, as he calls himself."

In rapid, earnest words, Luke Woodbridge told his son what had happened that day, between Enola, John Godfrey and himself, then added:

"When I got home, I called in the boys, and warned them against the dirty whelp. And one of them—Johnson, it was—told me something which enabled me to give your medicine-man the thrust that touched him to the quick; you saw him flinch, Davie!"

"Johnson swore that, a few days ago, he caught sight of John Godfrey, talking with a fellow whom he recognized as none other than the knave engaged in stirring up the Indians, hereabouts. And, more, he swore that he was a white man!"

"He surely must have been mistaken!"

"He vowed he was not, and you know how reliable Johnson has over proved himself. He swore that the fellow had short-cropped, light hair. That fits better with the greenish-gray eyes I saw under his painted brows, David!"

"I can't believe it," repeated Silverblade, but adding quickly: "But even so, one liar does not kill the truth! He may be false, but the Indian Messiah is surely true! And I am *his* follower, not that of any mortal."

With those words, Silverblade spurred on, setting a pace too rapid for conversation. Luke Woodbridge was content that it should be so. Apart from his natural anxiety to reach home, where his wife was lying so ill, he knew he had given his wayward son food for sober

thought, and it would do no hurt to give time for it to fairly take root.

For more than an hour that silence was unbroken, partly because both father and son had food for reflection, but mainly because they had reached a tract of ground so rough and broken that riding side by side was hardly practicable, even if haste was not the most essential thing, just then.

There was no semblance of a trail, but they were perfectly familiar with the lay of the ground, and in order to skirt the head of a rocky gulch, rather than valley, Silverblade was veering sharply to the right hand, when both men abruptly drew rein.

"Listen!" muttered the young man, as both their heads bowed slightly. "Surely that was a—panther, is it?"

"Lion," nodded Woodbridge, but then adding as a far different sound came to their ears: "Man, too, by glory! In trouble, or his voice tells lies!"

Silverblade was already in motion, sending his horse over the thick-lying rocks, heading direct for the gulch, for instinct told him those cries came from that point.

Woodbridge hesitated an instant, for his cares were more for the sufferer at home than with this stranger. But then he, as well, dashed ahead at reckless speed, and he imitated the example set by his son when they came to a point where a footman could make better time than one on horseback.

Silverblade, snatching the Winchester repeater from its slings at his saddle-bow, leaped to earth and ran swiftly forward, in less than a minute coming to a spot from whence he could look down into the gulch where a horrible tragedy was just about opening.

Two men, strung side by side upon a pole, were suspended midway down a rocky wall. Directly in front of them, its head and shoulders nearly filling an irregular hole in the rock, crouched a mountain lion, just giving vent to an angry howl, before making its death-leap!

With lightning quickness, Silverblade leveled his rifle and fired, but as the report came, so came that death-leap, and the helpless men yelled aloud as the maddened beast struck them squarely!

CHAPTER XV.

FOR MORE THAN LIFE.

THE doubly-laden pole was swung outward from the face of the rock by that shock, but the lion fell, writhing, kicking, twisting through the air until the broken rocks at the base of the wall received its carcass.

One more bullet caught the squirming mass before it came to a pause, but the cartridge was wasted. The first shot had sped true to its aim, and that leap had indeed been one of death.

The pole swung back, bumping the knees of the helpless men against the narrow ledge in which showed the mouth of the den. One of them cried sharply for help, and Silverblade as quickly answered back.

"Courage, Max! We'll have you out of that in a hurry, now!"

"Thank Heaven! It's young Woodbridge, for ducats!" exploded Big Horn Buck, recognizing the voice, though their backs were turned in that direction, rendering it impossible to sight the marksman.

"Never mind us! 'Nola—save her from—devils!" hoarsely panted Donaldson, forgetting himself in solicitude for the one being dearest to his honest heart.

"Shut up!" almost fiercely growled Horton, at that. "It'll help, not hinder, the time it takes to cut us down. We can *tell*—they only *guess*—see?"

Neither man was in fit condition to talk, just then. Both had felt the claws of the death-smitten lion, though those scratches alone were of no serious moment. But those hours of suspension, after such a cruel fashion, had done at least a share of the evil intended by John Godfrey when his diabolical ingenuity devised that torment for his enemies.

The instant he knew nothing further was to be feared from the mountain lion, Silverblade took in the details of the scene at one comprehensive glance; then, bidding Luke Woodbridge keep guard and encourage the two luckless beings, he dashed off to bring up the horses.

That was a much shorter task than expected, since he met the faithful creatures following along the track of their masters, and snatching the lariat from each saddle-bow, Silverblade gave the horses an encouraging cry, then swiftly retraced his steps.

"Only a little longer, friends!" he shouted, as

he scrambled down one side of the gulch, scale the other.

"Cut the rope, and let us drop!" hoarsely cried the Border Beagle, his very tones betraying how unbearable their torture had grown.

"Better yet! One little minute more!"

"He's right," said Woodbridge, following after his son. "It'd be clean death, or broke bones, to take such a drop, on the rocks. Brad up a bit longer, and we'll have you out of the safe and sound."

The stockman was quick and active enough but before he could gain the top of the wall over which John Godfrey had slung his captive, Silverblade had begun the work of rescue, guided by what that first glance had told him.

He knotted one end of each lariat around the tensely drawn ropes supporting that heavy weight, midway between the edge of the cliff and the tree to which each rope had been knotted.

He passed his lariats around another trunk close at hand, and had the slack closely taken up by the time Luke Woodbridge put in an appearance.

"Good boy, Davie!" the old man panted drawing a mighty breath as recompense for his eager battle with that stiff climb. "An hour's study couldn't cipher it out clearer than that."

"Take this end, father," retaining one of the ropes himself as he drew nearer the escarpment. "Ready to cut the rope when I give the word. You understand it all, I see."

"Surely," nodded the stockman, imitating his example.

"All ready, below!" called out Silverblade, casting a keen look downward. "We'll keep you from falling hard, never fear!"

"Falling'd be a mercy!" hoarsely answered Big Horn Buck, but never a word came from Cowboy Max.

His head hung loosely on his shoulder, and he looked more dead than alive. Liberty was harder to face than had been death!

"Draw tight, hold firm, father!" muttered Silverblade, taking a turn of the lasso about his waist, then around his arm, while his fingers gripped the pliant braid-like hooks of steel. "Ready? Then—*cut!*"

The two blades made a simultaneous sweep across the tensely drawn lariats, and as the ropes parted with a vicious twang, the shock came heavily upon both father and son as the weight was transferred to their *riatas* instead.

But they proved equal to the occasion, and moving foot by foot away from the escarpment, toward the tree about which their ropes were turned, they steadily lowered the laden pole, giving a cry of relief as they felt it touch the rocks at the bottom of the gulch.

"Drop the ropes, father, then come—carefully, for mother's sake!"

Silverblade darted away to the nearest point where a descent could be made without an almost certain fall, swiftly swinging or leaping from rock to rock, thinking far more of the sufferers than of his own safety. It was a reckless display of nerve and agility, but he reached the bottom of the gulch in safety, and in ten seconds more, his keen knife had cut the two men free from the pole, casting it aside, then gently straightening out their terribly cramped limbs.

"It's Heaven—after hell!" gasped Big Horn Buck, in barely recognizable tones; but never a sound came from the swollen lips of Cowboy Max.

That frightful ordeal had been too much for his powers, suffering as he did, a mental torture that discounted his bodily agony.

"Go fetch—whisky—pocket!" panted Luke Woodbridge, as he came up; and readily divining what he meant, Silverblade hurried away to where their faithful horses were standing, near the top of the other ridge.

The double trip occupied but a few minutes, yet that was long enough for the tough detective to rally in a measure, and he was just denouncing John Godfrey to the stockman as Silverblade came back with a flask of whisky.

And Cowboy Max, too, was beginning to rally, though as yet his meaning could only be guessed at. He gasped forth the name of the maiden, and a word or two about the need of great haste; but it fell to the lot of Big Horn Buck to tell the repulsive truth.

Luke Woodbridge turned pale as a corpse as he listened, and there was a fierce glitter in his eyes as they turned toward his son.

"You hear, David? This devil is a friend to your devil of a prophet! This is a mate to your cursed medicine-man!"

"Prove that, and I'll bring you the bloody scalps of both!" sternly answered the youth, turning away, as he added:

"You talk; I'll act!"

"Stop him, Woodbridge!" sharply said the detective, struggling to his feet. "I counted seven in the gang, and there may be still more. No one boy can fight the gang, but—with us, Silverblade!"

"All together, Davie!" cried out the stockman.

"Bring the horses over, and catch me up!" came back the answer from midway the rocky wall. "I'll take the trail, and see whither it leads."

A swallow or two of whisky, with brisk rubbing along his cramped limbs, had already wrought wonders in the case of Cowboy Max; and leaving Big Horn Buck, who was in far better case, thanks to his marvelous powers of body and mind, to assist Donaldson along the gulch toward its head, where he meant to cross with the horses, Luke Woodbridge hurriedly moved away on that mission.

When the point of crossing was gained by both parties, Woodbridge insisted on the rescued men mounting, and rather than cause delay by disputing his wish, they complied.

Once on comparatively level ground, they pressed ahead as fast as the tough stockman could run, along the broad trail left by John Godfrey and his knavish outfit. But rapidly as they progressed, they would never have overtaken Silverblade, had he not paused for their coming, a mile or more away from the lion's den.

"It is true, father," was his grave salutation as they came up. "The trail heads for the home of Weenamoo."

"The devils! If we get there too late, I'll—"

"Don't borrow trouble, man," interrupted Horton. "They'll never dare an open dash, but will lie in wait until dark comes to cover 'em. If we don't run into an ambushade by the way, we'll get there in good time, never you fear!"

This sounded reasonable, since none of those present knew what word had set John Godfrey off in such hot haste; and though the setting of the sun was near at hand, they surely ought to cover that distance before the enemy would deem it safe or wise to begin their evil work.

As they pressed on, father and son afoot, but keeping the horses at as rapid a gait as the nature of the ground would permit, Big Horn Buck told the story more in detail, and explained how they had, after hours of labor, gotten rid of their gags, thus holding the angry lion at bay with their cries and shouts. Then—

"Too late!" almost shrieked Luke Woodbridge, as the distant echo of firearms came to their anxious ears.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP.

THAT intervening mile was covered in a wild, breakneck dash, but Silverblade was first to come upon the enemy, and his was the first shot that told the outlying devils their game was up—his the voice that sent forth the blood-curdling war-cry of the long-peaceful Shoshones—and his the lungs that gave vent to an encouraging shout to the brave defender of that closed ranch, as a bright flash came from one of the loopholes.

Shouting, on fire with hot rage and thirst for vengeance, Luke Woodbridge, Big Horn Buck and Cowboy Max came dashing up at top speed; out they were too late for more than to make that flight complete. The enemy had not waited for more than one shot, one fierce yell from the rear, already discouraged by their hot reception in front.

The stockman and Horton pressed the chase, wasting more than one round of cartridges at real or imaginary shadows—too dimly seen to be called shapes—but Cowboy Max, forgetting all else in his anxiety for the safety of his loved one, could not pass the house by.

As his voice was recognized, Enola flung open the door, and with a sobbing cry of intense relief, love and joy, sunk into his ready arms.

When they realized the folly of further chase, Woodbridge and Big Horn Buck came back, pausing at the cabin built of heavy, squared logs, set apart for the cowboys employed on the ranch, drawn thither by the eager shouts and heavy pounding against the solid slab door.

They found the door closed from without, a couple of heavy timbers being propped against it. The one shuttered window was secured in a like manner. And when the door was opened, the three cowboys told how they had been entrapped with many abashed apologies.

Woodbridge said but little. He knew they had not been to blame, despite the warnings he

had given them the day before. Still, he could not even listen to their explanations without risking a fiery explosion. And it was too late for that, now!

Woodbridge hastened over to the now open ranch, but Big Horn Buck, in company with the cowboys, made a search of the grounds, which resulted in finding one dying wretch: stricken down by the shot first fired by Silverblade, the Shoshone!

Dirty Dick had played his last card in the game of crime, and he had barely life enough left him to make full confession: to denounce John Godfrey as head and front of the evil plot: to give the names of each of his comrades: and then his life went out.

No other bodies than his were found in that search, and it was with a dark and gloomy brow that Big Horn Buck entered the house, where father, mother and daughter, were gathered together in the sick-room.

"The head devil of all has escaped, Woodbridge," he said, bluntly, though his voice lowered as he recognized the presence of sickness. "If Silverblade don't—"

"Silverblade! My young chief! Weenamoo is waiting!" gasped the sick woman, rising up in bed, her trembling arms reaching out as though to clasp her boy-brave to her bosom.

"Come," whispered Little Sure Shot, gliding to the detective's side, a hand closing upon his arm and gently forcing him toward the door of the room. "We will look for my brother's coming, sir!"

But instead of going to the front door, where Cowboy Max stood on guard, Enola led Horton back to the kitchen, pausing just inside the door in such a manner as to check his entrance, while she quickly said:

"I am right—you are a detective, sir?"

"Yes. Why do you ask, in such a tone?"

"And you are looking for John Godfrey, to arrest him?"

"If he's the man I think, yes, again. You surely don't—"

"If I give him into your hands, you swear to protect his life, even against father, and against Davie?" persisted Enola, eagerly watching each change in his face.

"I'll protect his life with my own, if it comes to that!" was his eager reply. "Where is he, girl? How did you—"

Enola stepped aside, and motioned him to enter. She struck a light, and by its glow pointed out a bound form lying half-hidden in one corner of the room.

Big Horn Buck caught up the candle, and held it close to the gagged face of the prostrate man, giving vent to a low, joyous growl as he recognized John Godfrey!

Little Sure Shot tersely told how she had caught the villain, who had secured an entrance shortly after dark, by reaching the second story by way of the kitchen roof, where he had prepared for just such an emergency by making sure his chamber window could be opened.

"I heard a sound, and caught a glimpse of a dark shape crossing over to the front door," Enola explained. "I struck him down with a club," with a motion of her head toward the kitchen table, where lay an Indian war-club. "I bound him, as you see. Then—I fired at the first skulking figure I saw creeping toward the house, out yonder!"

She said no more just then, for Big Horn Buck caught her in his powerful arms, lifting her clear of the floor in a bear-like embrace. And Cowboy Max saw him fairly smothering the little maiden with kisses, as he came to the door.

"It's all right, pardner," chuckled Big Horn Buck, as he caught that ejaculation. "I'm just paying a debt of gratitude, and if you'll help me keep the wind off this rascal here, you can take 'em every one back from where I planted 'em! Can't he, Little Sure Shot?"

"You will help, Max?" murmured Enola, blushing rosy red, but bravely doing her duty, as she saw it. "Don't let father or Davie—They'll kill him, if you don't prevent!"

"Grab hold, Max! Let us out the back way, sweetness, and I reckon we'll fix it so justice shall have its full dues!"

And Big Horn Buck was right. The secret of that important capture was kept until the next morning, and by that time passions had cooled sufficiently for calm reasoning. And, to dispose of the matter right here, John Godfrey, as he has figured in this episode, was taken to meet his fate for deeds wrought under another name.

Long before the secret was disclosed, however, Silverblade came home, and the yearning arms of Weenamoo were filled with her darling boy brave.

If other lives had paid the penalty of that

night's work, the lips of David Woodbridge never disclosed the facts.

Before another sun set, David Woodbridge was gone!

"The New Messiah called him," calmly said Weenamoo, to her deeply grieved husband. "Weenamoo bade him go, to his duty. That is enough. It *should* be so, and so it is. The grandson of He-That-Fights-Long, must not be the last to greet the Indian Messiah!"

The days that followed were full of stirring events. But it is enough for the present to say that Silverblade, the Shoshone, sought for the Indian Messiah, with heart full of trust, of perfect faith, in no wise lessened by the exposure of one lying "mouth-piece." For it is true that the false prophet took to flight, and was seen no more in that section.

Enough that Luke Woodbridge was so crushed in spirit by the loss of his son, that he could summon up no anger when Cowboy Max bravely told his love, and begged for the hand of Little Sure Shot in marriage.

"Wait, Max," the stockman said, gloomily. "This is no time to talk of marriage, or giving in marriage. Wait—until my poor boy comes home, living—or dead!"

THE END.

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